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The Rio Kid Western

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By Lee E. Wells

The Rio Kid dares to challenge the power of King Baker, whose hired gun-slammers hold the range in the clutch of terror as they exact a heavy toll of money and lives! Bob Pryor and Celestino fight against odds to break up a bitter rangeland feud! 11

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HI WADDIES, welcome to the bunkhouse! Ground-hitch your cayuses and join us in the shade of the old Cottonwood in front of the house, for it's too hot to spend much time in the bunkhouse in the daytime, and it's mighty pleasant right now in the shade. Makes us think back just a few months ago when the snow was piled deep over vast sections of the United States.

It's very pleasant riding the range after cattle in the spring before the sun really gets hot, or riding the range in the moonlight during June or September. It seems to do something to a fellow, brings out the romance of life and makes one glad to be living—but when a fellow is riding to the rescue of snowbound cattle in bleak January or February, it's another story. He's still glad to be alive, but he really wishes that he was living some other kind of life. Being a cowboy and facing a blinding snowstorm or a blizzard enroute to feed or look after a bunch of cattle, or on the way back to the bunkhouse, is not the most pleasant thing in the world!

Many a time in winter I have heard cowboys bemoan the fate that made them cowboys instead of lawyers or professional men. They longed for good warm offices instead of the cold rides of the range. Then, in the spring or summer, I have heard those same cowboys, as they went galloping in carefree fashion over the range, remark: "This is the life!"

Sundown Slim

Sundown Slim, whom I often refer to in these articles, is a real character who came up with me from the old Bar C Ranch of Texas many years ago. We're in the rodeo business now and he still strings along. He was a great bronc rider thirty years ago, he's 67 now, and still quite a man, can handle any kind of a horse. He is too smart to get on one that he knows will buck, but if he was on one that started to buck he would still be able to put up a pretty good ride.

Strange how those old hands of the range never really seem to grow old, or as they grow old they do it most gracefully. Sundown Slim, although he has been broken up many times, has suffered broken limbs, broken arms and other injuries around wild stock, can still do a better or bigger day's work than a lot of young cowboys. He's quite a philosopher and we have some great times talking over the past and trying to figure out the future.

Diamond Dick

The other day Slim and I were having a gabfest when the question of noted Western characters came up and Slim mentioned "Diamond Dick" and remarked that while at one time he was almost as well known as Buffalo Bill, few people of today seem to remember him. I recalled that when I was a kid, just at the age where every noted Westerner, or especially those who were famous for the handling of fireams, were my idols, Diamond Dick was right at the height of his brilliant career.

He was not a lawman, not an outlaw, but he was one of the greatest and most expert rifle and revolver shots that this great country has ever produced, and his life, or at least a part of it, was something of a mys-

(Continued on page 8)

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

tery. Delving into the past we were able to learn something of this great character, and here it is:

"I can outshoot any man in Nebraska." Those words were spoken by a 16-year-old boy, and were the beginning of one of the most colorful careers of the Wild West days. The lad had been asked what he could do by a showman to whom the boy had applied for a job. Laughingly the proprietor of the show, who knew the then greatest shots of the country, including Buffalo Bill, told the young marksman to go ahead and "show his stuff." As a result of the demonstration, "Diamond Dick" came into the limelight.

Born Richard J. Tanner, near Taylorville, Illinois, on November 29th, 1869, he lived the normal life of a boy of that time. His family moved to Nebraska in 1878. The stories of famous marksmen greatly interested the youngster, and he became determined to be a crack-shot. Little seems to be known of the hours he must have spent in practice, or of when he first started to show proficiency, but by the time he was 16 his prowess with firearms was a local sensation.

Won Fame and Friends

For twenty years "Diamond Dick" appeared before the public, sharing fame with Buffalo Bill Cody, Calamity Jane. (Martha Jane Canary), Gordon W. Lilly (Pawnee Bill), and others whose names became legend during that period just before the turn of the century. Lightning-fast with both revolver and rifle, with an uncanny accuracy in shooting, his very picturesque appearance made his performances dazzlingly brilliant, while his affable and unassuming manner helped in winning him fame and friends.

The late Mexis Kennedy appeared with him in many exhibitions, she being billed at the time as the greatest woman shot in the world. His fame made him the idol of thousands of children of the time.

At the age of little more than thirty, Diamond Dick's interests turned from public entertaining to a medical career, and he entered the Nebraska Medical College, at Lincoln, to become a doctor. After four years of training Dr. Richard J. Tanner had taken the place of "Diamond Dick." He had discarded his buckskin jackets when he entered

college and had effaced all traces of a glamorous Westerner, and now when he began his medical practice in Norfolk, Nebraska, in 1910, he was and looked the part of a well-to-do physician.

Kept His Past Secret

All the time during his fifteen years of practice up to the time that he let it become known, the residents of the town, his patients, and even his closest friends never dreamed that the mild, beloved "Doc" Tanner was actually the famous "Diamond Dick" of the past.

Just why he chose to keep this a secret is not known. He had, while basking in the limelight of marksmanship, been just what he started out to be. There was no skeleton in his closet, nothing connected with his career as a Wild West marksman that he would want to forget, so far as anyone knew, but in a way he must have enjoyed mingling with people and never letting them know that in reality he was famous.

In 1925 there was a rodeo staged or sponsored by the American Legion Post in Norfolk, and when the local physician appeared in the parade wearing the familiar buckskin jacket and Western outfit, with his brace of pearl-handled revolvers and his rifle, and portraying the character of the once famous "Diamond Dick," citizens and friends could not believe the story that he was in reality the famed firearms expert. It was necessary for him to produce letters, photographs and other evidence before they could bring themselves to the full realization that the kindly doctor who had attended them for years was the famous "Diamond Dick", but with the facts out Doctor Tanner found himself once again the subject of much hero worship.

A Trigger-Fanning Champ

Many have been somewhat inclined to doubt the ability of the old-timers to handle their shootin' irons in the fashion related in tales handed down, but there are still those who will vouch for the great shooting ability of Diamond Dick, and it is said that once he brought down a huge crane from a flock flying so high as to be hardly visible. It is also said that his favorite stunt while shooting for exhibition was to shoot a penny from a woman's head. Like many other Western

(Continued on page 106)

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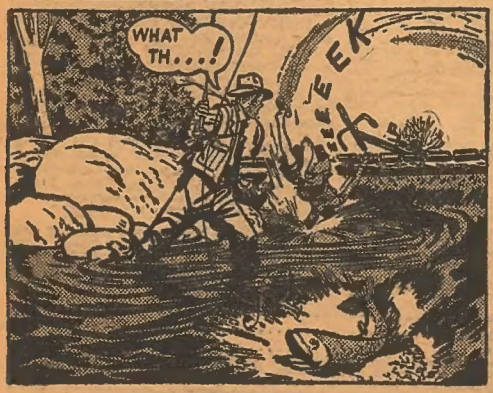
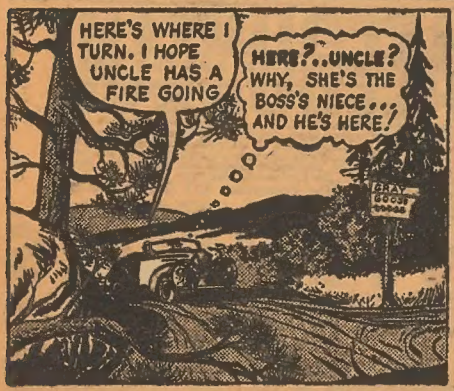
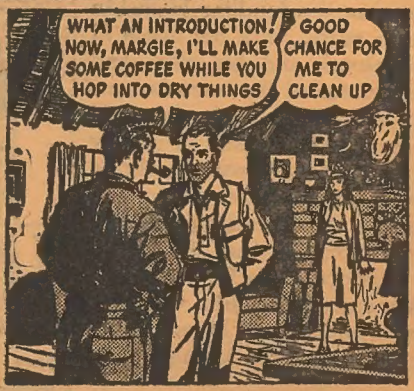
WHAT A FISH!







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The Rio Kid and Mireles hold their guns on the desperadoes (CHAP. I)

KING OF THE HIGHWAYS

By LEE E. WELLS

The Rio Kid dares to challenge the power of King Baker, whose hired gun-slammers hold the range in the clutch of terror as they exact a heavy toll in money and lives!

CHAPTER I

Gun Toll

THEY had just crossed the Continental Divide and the road dropped sharply out of the Beaverheads into the valley of one of the tributaries of the Jefferson River. Both men showed the strain and dust of the long trails up from the south. At the crest of the pass both men drew rein as though some silent signal had been exchanged between them.

This mountainous section of southwestern Montana Territory was wildly magnificent. Behind them the peaks of the Beaverheads marched across the horizon in great upthrust fingers of grim and forbidding granite. Far across the

valley, blue-hazed in the distance, the tumbled heights of the Pioneers made a jagged line against the sky. The rider in the high peaked sombrero folded his hands on the horn and leaned forward in the saddle. His wide brown eyes swept the horizon and there was a touch of awe in his voice.

"*Por dios,* thees country she's stand on end!"

His companion chuckled and his gauntleted hand stroked the neck of the dun he rode. The keen eyes under the broad brimmed cavalry hat studied the road that dropped in twisting loops before them.

"Things did get sort of jumbled around these parts, Celestino. It ain't much like our Rio Grande country."

The young Mexican shrugged eloquently and said nothing more. In a moment he urged his rangy gray after the dun as his companion started the descent. The trail made some hairpin turns then plunged into a wide and deep canyon that seemed to drop it through the very heart of the mountains. There were still turns and twists in the road but none of the hair raising drop-offs that the riders had seen just below the pass.

The canyon widened. The road was rutted by the deep, wide marks of heavy wagon tires, pitted and churned by the caulks of heavy draft animals. The two riders rounded one of the innumerable turns and pulled up short. A few yards away loomed the high bulk of a giant freight wagon, its cargo high above the bed, lashed with thick ropes and protected by a heavy canvas. It seemed almost impossible that such a giant vehicle could negotiate these mountain roads but their drivers were expert in handling wagon and teams.

The lithe rider on the dun swung over to one side of the road to pass the freighter, the young Mexican dropping behind him. As they rounded the end of the wagon, they saw that it had been stopped by a heavy gate swung across the road. The wagon was pulled by ten teams of horses and they stamped restlessly.

FOUR men stood by the gate, one arguing loudly, the other three stonily listening. To one side was a small shack with a sign above the door reading MONTANA TOLL COMPANY.

"You blasted robbers has raised the rates again," the angry teamster shouted as the two riders came up.

"It costs to keep up the road," one of the other men replied. He gave the two newcomers a swift, searching glance. "Pay the charge and get on yore way. Yuh're holding up the traffic."

"I got a blamed good notion to bust down yore gate and ride on through," the teamster snapped.

The three armed men said nothing but their hands stroked the the leather of their low-hung holsters. The teamster saw the gesture and a look of defeated anger passed over his face. He turned and faced his wagon and horses.

"Two dollars for the wagon and one team. Dollar each for the other teams. That makes eleven dollars."

The toll keeper grinned crookedly. "You get the right answer mighty fast."

"Eleven dollars," the teamster said harshly. "And this is just the first gate. How about the ferry and the other gates? Yuh raised the prices all along?"

"Reckon so," the tollkeeper said listlessly and held out his hand. "I'll take that dinero."

The teamster cursed again and dug deep in his pocket. He counted out the bills and one of the gunhung men walked to the gate, inserting the key in a huge padlock. The toll keeper approached the two mounted men, glanced briefly at them.

"Dollar for a horse and rider," he said tonelessly. He was paid and the two men rode through the opened gate just ahead of the heavy freight wagon. The canyon continued its winding course and the two riders dropped back even with the high seat of the freighter. The teamster scowled down at them.

"You with the Grossman Company?"

"Yup," the teamster said.

"Is Brant still in Virginia City?"

"Was awhile back." The teamster

spat over the side of the seat and wiped his stained beard with the back of his hand. He eyed his questioner sharply. "What's yore handle?"

"The name's Bob Pryor." The teamster's eyes widened and he sawed back on the reins setting the brakes.

"The Rio Kid!" he exclaimed. "Say, I've sure heard a lot about yuh. Never figured on seein' yuh up this way, though."

BOB PRYOR

"I got business at Virginia City." The Rio Kid smiled and reached up to accept the horny hand the freighter extended.

Bob Pryor was a tall man, lithe and muscular. His clean cut face was shielded by the broad brim of the cavalry hat. Friendly blue eyes looked up at the freighter, but they could become hard and cold on occasion. The fighting jaw and chin were firmly built and the head was well set on wide shoulders.

A blue shirt covered the deep chest that tapered down to a slender fighter's waist, circled by twin gunbelts. Matched Colts rode in the holsters that were carried low on each muscular thigh. Dark blue trousers encased the long legs, stuffed into highly polished boots that bore blunted spurs on the heels. A carbine rode in the saddle boot and, unknown to the teamster, a second pair of matched Colts snugged in hideout holsters beneath the shirt.

He had the appearance of a man used to command and his bearing was that of one who had served long in the army. Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, was born on the Rio Grande in Texas and had spent his boyhood on his father's ranch. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he had offered his services to the Union, joining the army as a cavalryman. His courage and his ability had earned him swift promotion and he soon became a captain.

For four years he had fought through the bloody hell of a war that almost bled

the country white. Cool and self-reliant, he quickly came to the attention of his superior officers. He became the confidant and friend of such men as Sherman, Dodge, Custer and Grant. Time and again he had been sent on dangerous and confidential missions for these commanders where quick decisions and instant action spelt the difference between success and failure.

AFTER four years of war, Bob Pryor looked forward to a life of peaceful ranching along his beloved Rio Grande. But it was not to be. He returned to his home during those lawless days, following the surrender at Appomattox, to find his father and mother killed, the ranch raided and burned by renegades.

Bob Pryor took the vengeance trail and followed it to its flaming end. But he found that he could not return to his home and the haunting sight of the two silent mounds where his parents slept. He had learned that everywhere in the West, lawless and greedy men stole and robbed and killed.

Bob Pryor dedicated his life to the cause of justice, to the aid of the downtrodden. So he rode the long adventure trails, siding law and order, becoming a scourge to the human vultures that infested the land that he loved. His swift guns and deadly marksmanship won him a name that became a by-word from the Canadian to the Mexican borders.

He became known as the Rio Kid. Deadly with six-gun or rifle, adept with knife or fists he was the fearless ally of those who sought to bring law and civilization to the wild towns and ranges of the West.

Almost equally as famous as the Rio Kid was the mouse colored dun that he rode. The broad black stripe up its back marked it as one of "the breed that never dies." Saber had carried the Rio Kid through most of the battles of the Civil War and the animal seemed to love the thunder and smoke of roaring guns. The mirled eye held a wicked gleam, a warning of instant trouble to anyone but the Rio Kid who tried to ride him. The hoofs could flash with the swiftness of a striking snake in a fight or blur along the ground in a burst of speed that would leave any other horse far behind.

The young Mexican was the Rio Kid's constant trail companion and inseparable friend. The Rio Kid had rescued Celestino Mireles from the hands of renegades years before along the Rio Grande. From that moment Celestino devoted his life to the Rio Kid. He was a shade smaller than his companion.

His skin was of the coffee-cream color of the high born Mexican. Deep, alert brown eyes were well spaced on either side of a slightly hooked nose. His oval face was high boned, the jaw and chin well molded. He wore a high crowned sombrero, an open throat white shirt, over which hung a short jacket.

A gun belt circled his narrow waist and at his right hip rode a heavy sheath knife. His trousers were tight, flaring out to bells that partially covered the tooled short boots that were thrust into the wide wooden stirrups. A rifle projected from a saddle boot below his left leg.

"I'm Snap Moran," the teamster said, straightening. "I'd be mighty proud to buy yuh a drink at Virginia City."

"Thanks," Pryor said with a grin. His wide lips sobered when he looked back the way they had come. "Looked like yuh might have had trouble back at the toll gate."

"They're plumb askin' for it," Moran growled. "I reckon King Baker knows it. Yuh noticed he's placed gunslammers with the toll keepers. Someday Montana folks is goin' to get mighty tired of Baker's robbery. I paid eleven dollars back there, probably more'n that at the ferry down below. Between here and Virginia City there must be three more toll gates. How much yuh reckon that adds to the cost of the groceries and hardware I'm carryin'?"

"Considerable."

"It's the puncher, the miner and poor folks like me who finally has to pay for it," Moran growled deeper in his beard. "It was a poor day for Montana when they allowed the toll companies to come in. King Baker keeps raisin' the tolls all the time. He's goin' to have mighty serious trouble and right soon if he don't watch out."

"The greedy never learn," the Rio Kid sighed. His face cleared and he waved

Idaho caught the Rio Kid's move and he swung around, his gun streaking fire as he sent a bullet at the man he hated. (CHAP. XIII.)

his hand to the teamster. "See yuh in Virginia City, Moran. *Adios.*"

He rode at a swift trot down the length of the ten teams that pulled the wagon, and cut back into the center of the road. He heard Moran's whip snap like a rifle behind him and the man's hoarse voice cursed the horses with professional fluidity. In a moment Saber had rounded a turn in the road and the heavy rumble of the wagon swiftly faded behind.

The road dropped steadily and finally leveled off across a high grass meadow that sloped gently down to the river crossing. Neither the Rio Kid nor Celestino spoke as they approached the crossing at a steady trot.

THE ROAD ended abruptly at the roily river that could be crossed only by a wide, flat-bottomed ferry boat. The vessel stood a few yards out in the stream, the boatman refusing to bring it into the bank. Ten cavalrymen held tight rein on their mounts behind a flushed and angry young lieutenant. He was leaning over his saddle, shaking his fist into the face of a stubble-bearded man who sneered back at him.

"Blast you," the young officer exclaimed. "Order that man to bring the boat in. We're on Government duty and you're delaying us."

"Now, ain't that too bad!" The renegade cuffed his hat back from his coarse face and looked the troopers over with deliberate insolence. A heavy gunbelt hung from his thick waist. Five pinched-faced renegades lounged against the rough walls of a log shack beside the road, sardonic smiles twisting their cruel lips. From long experience with the hired gunhawk and killer, the Rio Kid instantly recognized the type.

"We're on patrol to Virginia City," the officer said, trying to control his anger. "It's for your own safety—and you want to charge us."

"I reckon this is all the protection I need," the renegade said with a grin and patted his Colt. His muddy eyes ran over the troopers. "Dollar each for man and hoss, Lieutenant. Pay it or camp right here for all I care."

"I have a notion to teach you a lesson!" the officer stormed. The renegade laughed and turned to his friends at the cabin.

"Listen to the little tin sojer!" The laughter left him and his face became grim as he faced the officer again. "You start trouble, Lieutenant, and yuh'll sure regret it. King Baker'll have yore hide for interfering with the normal course of business."

The officer's face whitened to an ashy color in his anger but he knew the renegade was right. The soldiers dared not make any move against the men who operated the ferry without specific orders. The Rio Kid gave Celestino a swift glance and the young Mexican grinned and nodded. He turned the gray so that he could watch the gunhawks who lounged against the cabin.

The Rio Kid edged Saber forward and the renegade gave him a quick frown, muddy eyes resting a moment on the matched sixes. The Rio Kid touched his fingers to his hat brim.

"Sounds like trouble, Lieutenant."

"This—fool won't let us use the ferry. Soldiers are exempted by their contract and they know it."

"They was, sojer," the renegade said. "But King Baker has a new contract with the Territory. Ain't no one exempted this time."

"Government men always are privileged."

"You jaw too much," the renegade snapped. "Pay the toll or camp here until yuh rot. That boat stays out there until I see the color of yore dinero."

"I think," the Rio Kid said softly, "yuh've made a mistake, *amigo*. The ferry's coming in and it's taking these troopers across."

"Not until I give the word," the renegade swung around truculently.

"Then give it," the Rio Kid snapped. His hands blurred to his holsters. Before the renegade could move, he found himself staring into twin black gun muzzles. His eyes widened and he swallowed, hard. His hand jerked away from his own six as though it had been red hot. He recovered his voice and called over his shoulder.

"Blast him, boys!"

"Oh, no, *senor!*" Celestino laughed. "Thees boys stay verree still, eh? One leetle move toward the seex, *amigos*,

and you veesit *el diablo.*"

The loungers against the wall stood frozen as Celestino's heavy six covered them. They stood tense, like leashed cougars and just as dangerous. Celestino grinned at him, his six held steady.

One of the men edged slightly behind another. He made a swift grab for his six. Instantly, Celestino's Colt moved a trifle and belched flame. The man grabbed his shattered fingers with a howl of pain, his gun dropping to the dust. Celestino's grin grew wider.

"Anyone else?" he invited. No one moved.

The Rio Kid saw, from a corner of his eye, that the man on the ferry was moving the boat further away. Instantly one of his Colts lined and roared. Splinters jumped from the gunwale, bare inches from the tiller. The man jerked nervously.

"The next one's closer," the Rio Kid yelled. "Bring it in to the bank."

SWIFTLY the boat came for the landing. The Rio Kid eyed the burly desperado, gave a glance to the men standing against the cabin wall. The troopers sat stiff and silent, but grins creased their faces. The young officer's eyes danced, though he tried to keep his expression non-committal.

"Shuck yore six and toss it into the river," the Rio Kid commanded. "You gents up against the shack, move slow and careful down here. Throw yore guns in."

The boat hit the bank with a dull thud and the ferryman waited, fright showing in his pinched face. He was unarmed, a wrinkled old man in a shirt too big for him. The renegades exchanged swift looks with one another but the silent, threatening guns of the Rio Kid and Celestino left them no alternative.

They moved slowly toward the Rio Kid, gingerly lifted their guns from the holsters and tossed them into the river. One by one the weapons splashed into the water and at last all the men were disarmed. The Rio Kid turned to the young officer and waved his hand toward the boat.

"Our ferry is waiting, Lieutenant. I'll follow yore men."

The troopers grinned widely at the discomfiture of the renegades and, at a word, wheeled and filed onto the ferry. The Rio Kid and Celestino kept the guards under the steady threat of the leveled guns. At last the lieutenant turned.

"We can cross, friend."

The Rio Kid nodded. The toll keeper leaned forward as though straining at a leash. His heavy face worked angrily and his fists were doubled.

"You'll sure hear more about this, stranger. You'll be a marked man clean across Montana. Ain't no one bucks King Baker."

"I'm doin' it," the Rio Kid snapped. He gave Celestino a slight signal, swung Saber around and boarded the ferry just behind the officer. Celestino came after the Rio Kid and the loaded boat swung out from the bank.

The lieutenant stood by the Rio Kid's side, watching the raging disarmed men on the bank. His grin gradually faded and he faced the Rio Kid, his eyes clouded.

"You've made a bad enemy, friend. King Baker can't let any man defy his power as you have done. Montana is danger territory for you from this moment on."

CHAPTER II

Octopus

NOTHING more was said during the crossing of the river. The patrol debarked from the ferry on the far bank and the old boatkeeper pushed back into the river, giving the Rio Kid a dark scowl that was an unspoken threat. The officer moved his mount to the Rio Kid's side.

"I owe you thanks for getting us across. I'm Lieutenant John Arden, of Custer's command. It would be a pleasure to have your company as far as Virginia City."

"I accept. The handle's Bob Pryor. This is my friend, Senor Mireles."

"The Rio Kid!" Arden's brows arched in surprise and his hand shot out in a friendly grip. "I've heard of you, sir, and I'll not worry any more about those gents back there. You can take care of yourself. I've heard General Custer speak of you."

"Thanks," the Rio Kid said.

He swung in beside Arden at the head of the troop and they headed down the road that led through the rich valley. It was cupped in the towering grim peaks that marched northward toward the Canadian border. It was almost like old times to hear the creak of saddle leather and the metallic clink of accouterments behind him, the Rio Kid thought. Despite his hatred of war, the old familiar sounds of the army days gave him a nostalgic twinge.

John Arden was in his early twenties, probably only recently out of West Point. The Rio Kid studied the young officer. He saw a man of about his own size, lithe and muscular. He wore the uniform and rode his horse with the air of a born cavalryman. The blue hat brim shaded an angular face, with flat planed cheeks and straight, high-ridged nose. The brown eyes were set wide apart under heavy brows and were clear and direct. A wisp of a mustache covered the long upper lip and the mouth was full and generous.

"It's a blasted shame how King Baker strangles this country!" Arden said in a sudden gust of anger. "He's a blood-sucking menace, any way you look at it."

"His men sure have got a hump in their backs."

"Gunslammers — renegades!" Arden cried. "They keep King Baker in power. You pay a toll or take a bullet along King's highways. He uses fear as a weapon against the citizens of the Territory."

"First time I've seen the Army take a roweling," the Rio Kid said. Arden flushed and his fingers tightened on the reins.

"What can we do?" he asked. "Baker has a legal right to establish his toll gates and ferries. He owns them, franchised by the legislature. Since the country is not in a state of war, the Army must abide by civilian institutions. Custer's trying to get things changed, but he hasn't had any luck yet. In the meantime, we pay the tolls until further orders."

"Sounded like this King gent has raised the price."

"He has. Pryor, I'm on patrol. My men see that this section of Montana is protected and peaceful. We keep an eye on the Indians, check the raids of renegades and rustlers on the citizens, yet we can't move anywhere along the highways unless we pay King's toll. We're crippled and there's not a thing we can do about it."

"I think," the Rio Kid said softly, "that I'm glad I've come to Montana."

There were two more toll stops between the ferry and Virginia City. At each of them were the usual group of gunhung men and the Rio Kid began to feel that King Baker must have a veritable army at his command to enforce his toll schedules. The man's income must be very large to maintain such a payroll.

The patrol at last reached Virginia City and the Rio Kid took his leave of Lieutenant Arden. Again the young officer thanked Pryor for his assistance at the ferry.

"We'll be here a few days before we patrol back to the Idaho border and I hope to see you again during that time, sir." He indicated the main street of the town with a gesture of his hand. "That's King Baker's headquarters in these parts. Keep your eyes open and be ready for trouble."

"I'll do that," the Rio Kid nodded. "Can you tell me where I'll find Brant Grossman?"

"He'll be at the freight office, right near Wallace and Jackson Streets. You can't miss it, but anyone can tell you where the Bannack and Eastern Lines are."

The Rio Kid nodded and touched his hat brim. He wheeled Saber and headed down the road to the town. Arden led his troopers to the right down a side trail that led to a bivouac area.

THIS town of Virginia City was famous throughout the West and the Rio Kid approached it with interest. Here Henry Plummer and his gang of outlaws had ruled supreme, organized

so completely that the gang even had regular meetings and a secretary. Only the swift, harsh justice of the Vigilantes had broken it up. Not far away was Alder Gulch and the great gold strike of a few years before.

The town in itself was no place of beauty. Frame houses and false fronted stores lined the streets. The main thoroughfare was deep rutted by the broad tires of the heavy freighters, bordered on either side by an almost continuous line of hitchracks. There were the usual saloons and general stores. Assayers' offices and dealers in mining equipment and supplies disclosed the main interest of the town. A Wells Fargo sign swung slightly in the breeze that stirred up the dust of the street.

The Rio Kid's sharp eyes caught a sign on a two-storyed office building that read MONTANA TOLL COMPANY, and he knew it must be King Baker's headquarters. Saddled horses lined the hitchrack and stubble-faced men leaned against the building, thumbs hooked into heavy gun belts.

Just beyond, the two main streets of the town intersected and only a couple of doors beyond the corner stood the small office of the Bannock & Eastern Lines. The Rio Kid and Celestino swung into the hitchrack and dismounted. The interior of the office was plain and business like. At a long desk, three clerks on high stools transcribed bills of lading. Another clerk came up to the high counter that divided the room as the Rio Kid entered.

"I'm looking for Brant Grossman. The name's Pryor."

The clerk moved to the rear of the room and opened a heavy door, disappearing inside the office. Almost instantly the door jerked open again and a portly, middle-aged man came bustling out. He hurried to the counter, smiling broadly at the Rio Kid. He swung open a wicket gate.

"Come right in, Captain Pryor. I've been waiting for you."

He hustled the Rio Kid and Celestino into his office and closed the door. Brant Grossman was short and inclined to stoutness, but there was a ruggedness in his frame and jaw that denoted a man quite capable of taking care of himself.

Celestino Mireles

His face was round, inclined to redness. The lips were a bit pursy, but mobile and friendly. His eyes were a frosty blue but an ill-suppressed twinkle lurked in their depths. He was dressed in faultless broadcloth, dead black, relieved only by the white shirt and the polka dots in the flowing tie. He indicted chairs and seated himself at a roll top desk, fairly overflowing with papers, bills and ledgers.

"I'm mighty glad yuh accepted my offer and came up here, Pryor. I needed a man like you and General Custer said yuh love trouble like a hound dog loves a hunt."

"That sounds like the General," the Rio Kid chuckled. Brant Grossman smiled and became serious again.

"What do yuh think of our toll roads, Pryor?"

"Expensive. It would sure cost a heap to travel from one end of the territory to the other."

"Did yuh notice a heap of improvements on the roads from the Border? Did they look well kept?"

The Rio Kid shook his head. "I saw no one working on them and in places there could be a heap of repairs made. Something else I saw I didn't like—too many gunslammers."

Grossman sighed and his thick fingers drummed on the desk top. He looked up

at a huge map of the territory that hung on one wall and sighed again.

"I reckon there's no need for me to tell yuh the condition of the toll roads. Yuh've had a sample and the same thing's pretty much true all over the Territory. I reckon I'm as much to blame for it as any other man who voted to establish 'em."

"You voted for them?"

"Sure. When the Territory was first opened, we figured that an easy means of transportation was the one thing we needed most. Good roads would bring more people into Montana, and they'd be a means of quick supply for those that was already here. There wasn't much money floating around loose in those days and we was mighty anxious to get things started—but they sure got out of hand."

PRYOR was beginning to get the picture.

He nodded.

"King Baker, I reckon," the Rio Kid said.

"Mostly. But there's others like him. Maybe not quite so bad. The legislature voted to franchise toll road companies. They would build new stretches and improve the roads already in, bridge streams and run the ferries. We figured that if the companies saw a profit they'd build and improve a heap faster than we could by taxation. It'd take the direct cost off the citizen and it looked to be a mighty good idea. But we sure didn't see all the tricks a bunch of sharp gents could figure up."

He was silent and the Rio Kid glanced up at the map, noticing the network of roads that began to cover the southern part of the state, thrusting exploratory fingers down the valleys to the north. Grossman smiled wryly.

"Take King Baker, for instance. He made money in mines during the boom days here in Virginia City and he had a heap of influence at Bannack. Some said he owned legislators body and soul and those he didn't, he could buy. I don't know how true that is, but Baker has a heap of power. He was mighty friendly with some of the men who wrote the franchise law and prepared the contracts under it. He saw that there was a heap of safeguards left out of the contract.

"We was so anxious to get the road program started, I reckon we didn't take time to be cautious. We passed the bill and started letting out the contracts. King Baker organized the Montana Toll Company and he got the best franchises.

"At first everything went along like we hoped it would. Other companies got contracts and there was hundreds of miles of road built. Ferries and bridges was made to cross the rivers and the companies kept the roads in good repair. The toll schedule was reasonable and we all figured we had done exactly the right thing."

"Then it changed," the Rio Kid suggested. Brant Grossman swore under his breath and nodded.

"The Montana Toll Company bought out three other outfits and it now controls the whole main artery road clean across the Territory from west to east. Then Baker got real friendly-like with the other outfits and they all agreed to work together. Right after that he raised the toll rates on the roads and ferry crossings. Folks got riled but Baker pointed to his contract. According to the contract, the toll companies could set their own schedules and no one could do a blasted thing about it. A bill came up to take this power away from the companies, but Baker saw that it was voted down at Bannack."

"It's a bad situation."

"Plenty bad," Grossman agreed and hitched forward. "King Baker has a strangle hold on the whole Territory and every business man in it. He can make or break us if we don't smash him first. That's where you come in, Pryor."

"How?"

"I intend to fight Baker. His tolls are driving me out of business and making the cost of living so high that no one will come to Montana or invest in it. I got some powerful backing, mighty high in the Territory. We'll handle the legal end of it, but we need a gent like you to handle the gunhawks and renegade scum Baker has called in to keep his control of the highways."

"Where does Custer fit in?"

"He's one of us. If you'll agree to listen to our proposition, I can arrange

a conference tonight with my backers. We want to move quiet so Baker won't have a chance to get in some of his crooked moves. Pryor, you'll be doing every man and woman in Montana a big favor if you throw in with us. You'll be removing a deadly stranglehold on every business, ranch and mine."

"I've already had a run-in with some of Baker's men," the Rio Kid said thoughtfully and he told about the incident at the ferry. He arose and extended his hand. "Yuh can count on me to at least listen tonight, Grossman. I'll meet yuh here."

"Fine!" the pudgy man fairly bounced out of his chair. "I'll have things arranged. There's a hotel right down the street where you can put up."

"Tonight," the Rio Kid repeated and moved toward the door. Brant Grossman checked him.

"Those guns you wear look mighty handy, Pryor. Better keep 'em loose in the holsters. Baker will have word by nightfall of what you did at the ferry. He won't let you get away with it."

"I'll watch," the Rio Kid promised. He frowned and shook his head. "Seems like this King Baker uses murder and fear like he would a weapon."

"That's exactly right," Grossman said quietly. "Gents that buck Baker generally don't live long."

CHAPTER III

Conference

SOON afterward, the Rio Kid and Celestino left the Bannack & Eastern offices, circled the hitchrack and mounted their horses. They swung out into the crowded street and threaded their way back to Wallace and Jackson Streets. At the main corner, the Rio Kid pulled to one side, working Saber easily toward a hotel sign that hung over the planked sidewalk.

The hotel was an edifice built into the side of the hill, clawing its way upward toward the crest in a series of setbacks. The place looked clean and the Rio Kid dismounted before the hitchrack. In a short time he and Celestino had registered and returned to take care of their mounts.

That done, they followed a limping porter who led the way up innumerable short stairways to a large and airy room on the topmost floor. Two wide windows overlooked the roof below and the far side of the street lined with business houses. On the other side of the room a second window gave them a view down the gulch and of the steep slope on which the hotel was built. This was by far the best room the Rio Kid had ever had in any Western hotel.

It was night by the time the two trail partners had cleaned up and had eaten in the large dining room. There was still about an hour to go before the appointed conference at Brant Grossman's office and the Rio Kid wanted to see the town.

He and Celestino strolled down the planked sidewalk, keeping close to the store fronts to avoid the push of the crowd. They passed the office of the Montana Toll Company and the Rio Kid's sharp eyes studied it. The door was open and he saw some more of the gunhung men leaning over a high counter. The Rio Kid passed on, hesitated before the Nugget Saloon, then climbed the three steps and crossed the canopied porch.

As he pushed through the batwings, two men left the Montana Toll Company office. One of them was the renegade whom the Rio Kid had disarmed at the ferry. The other man was tall, swart, dressed in black shirt and trousers, black hat pushed back on his bushy hair. A gunbelt hung low at the right hip, the holster tied down to the muscular leg. The renegade cursed under his breath.

"It was him, I tell yuh! I saw him when he passed the door."

"He couldn't go far," the tall man said in a deep, rasping growl. "Yuh're sure he's the Rio Kid?"

"He gave his name to the little tin sojer on the ferry. Gramp Bolton heard him. He's got a trigger-fast rep all over the country, Idaho. Mebbe yuh'd better not tangle with him."

The tall man's cruel lips broke in a crooked smile that didn't reach the glittering black eyes.

"I ain't never yet met the man I was scared of or couldn't down. Git along back to the office, Grady. I'll handle the Rio Kid for the boss."

Idaho adjusted his holster, growled again at Grady, who turned and walked reluctantly away. Idaho moved up the street, black eyes restlessly searching the crowd. He hesitated before the Nugget, then continued his prowl down the planked sidewalk.

The Rio Kid and Celestino had a single drink at the Nugget. Except for its size, it was the usual mining town saloon, crowded now with miners and freighters and a few of the shifty-eyed breed that the Rio Kid had come to associate with King Baker. This group kept pretty much to itself and the Rio Kid noticed the hard looks the gunhawks received from the rest of the men. The Rio Kid glanced at the big clock above the bar, nudged Celestino and left the saloon.

The freight office was dark when the Rio Kid approached it. He knocked on the door and instantly a dim light glowed. Brant Grossman unlocked the door and admitted the Rio Kid. Lamp light streamed from his private office but the rest of the building was dark.

"Glad yuh come, because the others are waiting," Grossman said, locking the door again. He led the way to his own office.

Two men waited there, one in an army uniform. He was a slender man with a young and arrogant face, relieved by the wide friendly smile and the honest pleasure that was mirrored in his flashing eyes. Long yellow hair hung down to the blue uniform coat. He was on his feet in a swift, flowing movement, hand extended.

"Captain Pryor! Glad to see you!"

"General Custer!" The Rio Kid accepted the young officer's hand in a warm clasp.

"Captain, I want you to meet Jim Ashley. He's Governor of Montana Territory."

THE second man arose from his chair in a slow and dignified way. He was big, and heavy about the shoulders. There was something magnetic about James M. Ashley. Thick black hair waved back from a high forehead, cut sharp at the nape of the neck. His eyes were dark and his glance was keen and probing. The wide-bridged, straight nose was like that of a Roman senator's. The mouth was wide, thin, the lips pressed close together. The chin was slightly rounded but there was strength in it.

"My pleasure, sir," Ashley said in a well modulated voice. "I've heard much of you."

"Thank yuh," the Rio Kid accepted Ashley's hand and found the clasp warm and firm.

There was another knock at the door and Grossman hurried into the outer office. He returned in a moment, followed by a lovely girl and Lieutenant Arden. The young officer saluted General Custer, grinned at the Rio Kid.

"My daughter, Della," Grossman said. "She is my partner and heiress, so I feel that she should be present."

"Delighted," Governor Ashley rumbled and Custer gallantly bowed.

Della Grossman was beautiful. She was small and slender. Corn silk hair swept out from under her hat, ending in little curls that clustered around her neck. Soft blue eyes smiled an acknowledgement of the Rio Kid and the distinguished men. A pert nose and red lips gave a piquant touch to her oval face. She accepted Lieut. Arden's hand as she sat down and the Rio Kid noted the swift flush of pleasure in the young man's face.

Governor Ashley remained standing and all interest centered in him. He directed his speech to the Rio Kid but his flashing eyes swept over the other men from time to time.

"Brant Grossman called you to Montana, Captain Pryor, at the suggestion of General Custer and myself. The General said flatly you were the only man for the job we have in mind and, now that I've met you, I heartily concur. We hope that you will be interested in our proposition."

"He will be," Custer said with a slight chuckle. "I know him too well."

"King Baker owns and operates the

Montana Toll Company," Ashley continued. "He has, by fair means and foul, gained too much power over the life of the whole Territory. Though I blush to say it, his power extends into the legislature itself. His rotten money has bribed and bought lawmakers until he can almost dictate the laws that will rule Montana. His wealth obtained him a franchise to control a road that extends from the border to Virginia City, across the Gallatin Valley to the Yellowstone, and up that river to Miles City. An affiliated company controls the remainder of the road to the eastern boundary."

"It's like a fence across the state," Brant Grossman cut in.

"Exactly," Ashley agreed. "Baker saw that his contract was as flexible as a piece of rubber. The man is shrewd and smart. He knows that legal fixing wasn't the only part of the game. He has used his wealth and gains to hire gunhawks by the score and faster gunmen to control and command them. He has scattered these killers the full length of his road, at his toll gates, bridges and ferries. He uses flying squads of killers to crush opposition to his rule and his fees wherever it turns up. Bribes and bullets, crooked lawmakers and downright fear keeps King Baker on top."

"I was sent up here to subdue the Indians and open up this whole territory for settlement," Custer growled. "My patrols are stopped at every toll gate. I can't move my regiment across the road unless I pay a whacking fee to King Baker. At a dollar for a man and rider and fifty cents for every additional horse, how much do you think it would cost for the Seventh Cavalry to cross Baker's road just once?"

The Rio Kid made a soundless whistle and his eyes narrowed.

"But yuh're on Government business, General."

"That's right," Custer snapped. "Remember Baker's political power. Suppose I refused Baker's fee, defied his gunhawks and maybe rid the world of a few of the worthless skunks? A howl would go up that you could hear from

As the masquerading renegades came closer, the three defenders poured a deadly fire into them, and the charge faltered (CHAP. VI)

California to Washington. They'd call it high-handed military methods, I'd be setting aside civilian institutions and flouting Territorial laws. I'd have every jealous general in the army asking for my scalp. I risk my commission if I buck King Baker. But I can't pay his tolls and handle the Indians. The redskins slip north of the road and I'm done unless I pay out several thousand dollars that the War Department hasn't authorized."

GROSSMAN nodded agreement with this.

"I run a freighting line," he said quietly. "It costs me ten or eleven dollars every time a wagon of mine comes to a toll gate. If I hauled a load from the eastern border to the western, I'd pay well over four hundred dollars in tolls on the load. What do yuh reckon that does to the price of everything that's sold in Montana?"

"Part of the contract," Ashley resumed, "was that the toll companies were to repair the roads, build new ones and keep all of them in good condition. On one stretch of Baker's road, he works a man with a shovel one day in the year and claims that fulfills his contract. His hired lawmakers see that there's nothing I can do to cancel his franchise or remove the toll law from the books."

"It's a bad situation," the Rio Kid said. "What do you want me to do?"

Ashley looked at Grossman and Custer, seemed to get assurance from them.

"The public is mighty slow to anger, Captain," Ashley said. "Baker's rotten money won't mean much if the politicians know they'll lose their offices when they back Baker. I intend to expose his paid henchmen at Bannack. General Custer and I will attempt to break Baker's political power, but there is still his lawless organization along the road. Your job is to smash his gunhawks and renegades, scatter 'em, and chase 'em out of Montana."

"Mighty big job," the Rio Kid said slowly.

"One you can do, Pryor," Custer said grimly. Ashley again cleared his throat for attention.

"Break up the gangs around his toll houses, Pryor. The more trouble you stir up along the road, the more unpopular King Baker will become to the public. I'll prove his grafts and bribes. When the stench gets too big, no legislator will dare support the franchise law and contracts if he hopes to stay in office or keep his name unsullied. Once that point is reached, I can have the toll laws repealed and the contracts canceled. That will end King Baker."

"I'd like to go after the gent myself," Custer sighed, "but I don't dare. You'll have help, Pryor. Lieutenant Arden is about to be given a leave, effective at once. I hope he spends the leave with you—out of uniform, of course. There's an old army scout in Fort Smith who knows every trail, mountain draw and hideout in the whole territory. I think you'll be able to use him. There it is, Pryor. Will you take the job?"

The Rio Kid looked at Celestino, who smiled broadly and nodded. John Arden leaned forward, watching the Rio Kid with excited eyes. Ashley hid his uncertainty under a mask of dignity.

"I'll take the job," the Rio Kid answered. "I've fought gents like King Baker all my life and I'm glad of this chance yuh're giving me. The West will be a mighty wonderful country when skunks like Baker are driven out."

"I knew you would!" Custer exclaimed.

The conference continued for awhile, this time in the nature of planning. Ashley would return to Bannack and Custer to the distant headquarters of his Seventh Regiment. The General would start a series of letters and protests to Washington and the Montana Legislature, while Ashley—by speeches, letters and investigations—would start undermining Baker's power at Bannack.

The Rio Kid was to ride to Fort Smith, accompanied by Lieut. Arden. He would gain a familiarity with the road and Baker's methods. The Rio Kid's plans were left entirely to him, but he was to stir up trouble along the toll road and start smashing Baker's renegade army. The conference broke up fairly late and all the stores were closed when the Rio Kid and Celestino came out on the street.

Lights blazed only from the saloons.

Grossman, Lieut. Arden and his daughter turned toward the residential district after brief good nights. Ashley and Custer had left separately a few minutes before and had disappeared. Celestino shivered slightly in the cool night air that swept down from the high Montana peaks.

"*Por dios*, I do not like thees north countree. She is cold, eh?"

"It's get a heap warmer when we tangle with King Baker's gunhawks," the Rio Kid answered. "Maybe a drink will warm yuh up before we hit the bed."

He led the way to the Nugget and pushed through the swing doors. Despite the lateness of the hour there was still a line of men at the long bar and several of the gaming tables were crowded. Tobacco smoke hung in long blue streamers just below the high lamps. Once again the Rio Kid noticed the gunhawks who seemed to congregate apart from the rest.

HE PUSHED to the bar, ordered a drink for himself and Celestino. He glanced idly at the bar mirror and his eyes imperceptibly hardened. A tall man dressed in black eyed the Rio Kid, a touch of uncertainty in the evil, glittering eyes. The holster that was thonged down to the right leg disclosed the man's trade, but he was far above the average run of gunslammer the Rio Kid had seen so far. The man would be swift and dangerous, treacherous as a sidewinder. The Rio Kid nudged Celestino.

"Down yore drink and be ready for trouble, *amigo*. There's a strange hombre behind us who's trying to read our brand."

"Trouble she's come queeck," Celestino murmured. He quietly loosened the Colt in its holster as he tossed down the drink. The Rio Kid toyed absently with his glass, apparently not watching the mirror.

But he saw the man in black turn his head and speak quickly to a renegade that stood close by. The man shrugged his shoulders and the swart man's uncertainty increased. He was not sure of his man, the Rio Kid knew. A movement on the other side of the mirror caught Pryor's attention. Snap Moran, the teamster, came to the bar, tapped the Rio Kid on the shoulder.

"I told yuh we'd meet in Virginia, Rio Kid!" he said and his voice carried clearly to the man in black. Moran edged to the bar beside the Rio Kid and slapped his hand loudly on the polished wood.

"A drink for me and my friends," he ordered.

The Rio Kid spoke low, his lips hardly moving. "Look in the mirror, Snap. Who's the gent dressed all in black?" Moran looked and his lips twisted in a wry grimace.

"That's Idaho Devlin, top gunman for King Baker in these parts. He's a mighty touchy gent and thinks a heap of his gun speed. Ain't no one dared buck him yet."

"He's looking for me—and trouble, I think," the Rio Kid said quietly. "Yuh'd better fade out when it starts, which is going to be right soon."

"Moran ain't never backed down yet," the teamster grunted. "Yuh're right, he's comin' this way!"

The Rio Kid didn't turn or look again in the mirror. He felt his muscles tense as a sudden silence descended on the room. He heard the clink of Idaho's spurs, then a hard finger tapped him on the shoulder. He turned easily, smiling a little, to meet Idaho Devlin's dark scowl.

"Word's come to me about yuh, mister," Idaho said, "and I don't like what I've heard."

"Such as?" the Rio Kid asked easily. Celestino had edged away so that the bar would not hamper his draw. He paid little attention to Idaho, knowing the Rio Kid to be capable of defending himself. The young Mexican warily watched the group of gunhawks who seemed to wait for some signal from Devlin.

"For instance, the ferry at the Jefferson," Idaho answered. "I hear yuh got plumb proddy and rode across without payin' the regular fee. Folks in these parts don't like that."

"Some don't." The Rio Kid's smile grew wider but his eyes remained frosty. "Others figure different. Me, I don't like to be crowded by a bunch of skunks wearing guns."

CHAPTER IV

Ultimatum

A MURMUR of approval ran around the big room and Devlin's scowl grew darker. He seemed to fight down his anger and made no move toward his six. His glance shifted swiftly to the gunhawks and then centered on the Rio Kid again.

"Yuh sound to me like a plumb lawless gent. We don't want yore kind in Virginia City or anywhere in Montana. Yuh'd better ride back where yuh come from, mister. Ain't no part of this country goin' to be healthy for yuh."

"Yuh're ordering me out?" the Rio Kid asked softly. "Suppose I don't go?"

"I can take care of that, too," Idaho said confidently. The Rio Kid sized up the man, the arrogant stance, the glittering eyes and cruel mouth.

"Yuh work for King Baker."

"Sure. What of it?"

"Seems like Baker throws too wide a loop—maybe yuh do, too, Devlin. Not much use of augering with yuh, though. There's only one language yore breed of mule-heads understand."

Idaho's eyes widened and a red flush crept up his neck. His lips writhed back and his hand stabbed downward. The Rio Kid moved with the speed of a released spring. His fist crashed squarely into Devlin's stomach, doubling the man over. His right crossed and smashed into the gun hawk's face, driving him backward, spreading him onto the floor.

It had happened so fast that none of the men in the room had moved. For a long, tense second gunhawks and miners stared down at the sprawled figure, eyes bulging. Idaho's eyes blinked open and he stared blankly up at the hanging lamp. Then he seemed to realize what had happened.

He twisted to one side, reaching for his Colt. His sudden move broke the paralysis that held the rest. The gunhawks surged forward and the Rio Kid's matched Colts fairly jumped into his hands. Celestino swept his own six from the holster. One of Pryor's Colts covered Devlin and the man's fingers froze a scant inch from his holster, taloned, trembling.

"Yuh won't live long," the Rio Kid said quietly. His other gun had levelled toward the renegades and they stood straining against the black round threat of the muzzle.

"Take him apart, Rio Kid," Snap Moran growled. His six also threatened the bunched renegades. "That gent has always had snakes to back his play. See how much sand he's got alone. Me'n yore pard will hold these skunks plumb still."

Idaho remained propped on one elbow. Sawdust stained the back of his shirt and made a brown trail down his trouser leg. His eyes snapped viciously and his lips had pulled back from his teeth.

"Yuh'll lift that six right careful, Devlin, and yuh'll pitch it to the far wall. If yuh even quiver an eyelash wrong, Boot Hill will have another grave. Shuck that six—pronto!"

Idaho did not move for a long second. Then, slowly his fingers lifted the heavy Colt from the holster. He glared murder at the Rio Kid and, with a long, slow swing, threw the weapon to the far end of the bar.

"Now yuh get up on yore hunkers," the Rio Kid ordered. "Go tell King Baker I don't scare easy at all. Tell him to send something better'n you if he wants me out of town or planted six feet under."

"I'll kill yuh!" Idaho said.

"I doubt that," the Rio Kid snapped. "But yuh can try any time yuh want. Tell Baker I intend to run every gunslammer, outlaw and renegade on his payroll out of the country."

"Yuh won't live that long," Idaho retorted defiantly.

A gun blasted above the batwings and a flame lanced from the outer darkness. The slug whined close to the Rio Kid and smashed into the mirror behind the bar. Instantly the Rio Kid's Colt smashed a reply and splinters jumped from one of the doors. It swung open

JAMES M. ASHLEY

JAMES M. ASHLEY, one of the early Territorial governors of Montana, was born in Pennsylvania in 1824. His father and mother were the active preachers and followers of a small religious sect and the lad found life at home harsh and restrictive. He had very little formal education.

At the age of sixteen he ran away from home and, for a time, worked on the Ohio River boats. He finally found a job in a printing office and later became editor of a Portsmouth, Ohio, newspaper. In his work along the river, he saw slavery at its worst and he became a vigorous opponent of it.

He entered politics and supported the rise of the Republican Party, acting as delegate to the 1856 Convention. In 1858 he was elected to Congress, where he remained for ten years.

Appointed Governor of Montana Territory, his strong will came into immediate conflict with the entrenched political party. He fought for what he believed to be right, but his opponents gained power in Washington and Ashley was finally removed as governor. He returned East and entered actively into politics, supporting Greeley in 1872. He invested his fortune in railroad enterprises and was president of the Toledo, Ann Arbor and Northern Michigan from 1877-93, when financial difficulties became acute.

One of the three early Governors of Montana, Ashley can be credited with guiding the State through some of its most difficult problems.

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on the impact of the lead.

Celestino's head jerked around and he came to a crouch to meet the surprise attack. This was the chance for which the bunched renegades had waited. Hands slapped down to holsters and Moran's six-gun roared and bucked back in his hand.

"Watch them sons!"

The Rio Kid moved back against the bar and he slammed another shot through the batwings to keep the killer outside at bay. But he realized that the situation had slipped out of hand. Idaho had flung himself flat on the sawdust again to be clear of the fire of his own men. Celestino's slug caught a renegade in the shoulder and spun him half around.

IN ANOTHER second, the Rio Kid and Celestino would be the target for a dozen guns at a close range. The teamsters and miners in the room had scattered out and they were taking a hand. The Rio Kid's jaw tightened and his sixes pointed upward. Gun thunder rolled from his hands and the hanging

lamps smashed out into darkness.

Instant pandemonium broke loose. Guns lanced in the darkness from every direction. A man screamed in mortal agony, chairs and tables crashed to splinters. The Rio Kid threw himself flat and wriggled to the far end of the bar. He circled it as wild slugs thudded into the wood. The noise was deafening.

A moving body touched the Rio Kid and he grappled instantly with a man he could not see. His opponent hissed a Spanish oath and a fist looped out of the darkness, scraping the length of the Rio Kid's jaw. Pryor's hands fell away.

"Celestino!"

"*Amigo! Por dios,* I am verree warm now, eh?"

"It'll get hotter. There's a door behind the bar. Make for it."

They moved along the wood floor grille behind the bar. More bullets smashed into the bar, sent shattered glass from the bottles above showering down on them. Powdersmoke was thick and choking. Idaho Devlin's voice roared in the darkness, a command to his men.

"Outside, yuh rannihans!"

The Rio Kid reached the door behind the bar, pushed it open. The next room was pitch black and his groping hands struck stacked cases of whisky. He found another door, jerked it open and slid through to an alley behind the saloon. Celestino was close at his heels.

"Around in front!" the Rio Kid snapped. "I want to see that gent Devlin again."

They raced around the corner of the saloon and plunged out into the street. Men erupted from the batwings of the saloon, firing back into the big room as they fled. The Rio Kid could not tell friend from foe in the darkness, teamster and miner from renegade. Men scattered in every direction, guns ready to fire blindly at any one who challenged them. The Rio Kid pulled Celestino back around the corner.

"No sense gettin' ourselves shot up," he said tightly. "The fracas is about over. We'll wait until daylight."

"I am wonder, my General, how many *hombres* is kill in there."

"I don't know," the Rio Kid answered grimly. "One of Devlin's gunhawks must have headed for a drink and spotted us over the batwings. He took a hand and sure cut loose a tornado. Maybe we'll have a few less of Baker's men to fight after this. Let's head back to the hotel."

The trail partners reluctantly moved away from the saloon. It was in the nature of neither one of them to run away from a fight, but the free-for-all gun battle at the saloon was something else again. Lights blazed everywhere throughout the town, the citizens aroused by the roar of guns. Half dressed men appeared in the street and questions were called to the Rio Kid as he and Celestino worked their way to the hotel.

At last they reached their room and the Rio Kid pulled down all the blinds before he lighted the lamp. By the yellow light he saw that Celestino's clothing was covered with sawdust where the young Mexican had crawled along the floor to the bar. There was a red scrape the length of the Rio Kid's jaw where Celestino's knuckles had left their mark. Other than that, neither man was the worse for wear.

The Rio Kid cocked his head to one side and listened to sounds from the street. He heard shouts and the movement of men but there were no more gunshots. The fight was definitely over and the Rio Kid moved close to the lamp.

He worked on his guns, ejecting spent shells, cleaning the weapons and loading them again. Celestino busied himself with his own six-shooter, sitting on the edge of the bed. The tumult in the street gradually died down and at last night silence held Virginia City. The Rio Kid shoved the Colts back in their holsters, rose and stretched.

He snapped to attention when he heard footsteps in the hall. Two men approached the room. Celestino arose from the bed, gun in his hand, the hammer dogged back. The steps approached the door and stopped. There was a moment of silence and then someone tapped on the panels.

QUICKLY the Rio Kid moved to the door, but Celestino cut in ahead of him. He pushed the Rio Kid back and, six leveled, flung open the door. His gun muzzle menaced the dapper man who stood framed in the lamplight. The Rio

Kid glimpsed Idaho Devlin standing behind the stranger and his hands dipped down to his Colts.

"We come in peace, Pryor," the dapper man said. His bloodless lips twisted in a grin. "At least this time. Idaho has been duly chastised."

"Who are yuh?" the Rio Kid demanded.

"King Baker. May I come in? It's time we had a talk."

Celestino's brows arched high but the Rio Kid's clean-cut face remained expressionless. He nodded slightly and King Baker stepped into the room. Idaho moved in behind him, dark and evil, glaring hatred at the Rio Kid.

King Baker's appearance was a surprise to the Rio Kid. He was an Easterner who had come West because of his lungs. He was slender and not very tall. He walked with a slight stoop. There was a pallor to his face, confirmed by the paleness of the lips that could move easily in a smile of sardonic cruelty. His eyes were a pale washed blue, sharp and almost inhuman. Pale brows made his thin, bony face seem almost hairless.

He was dressed in a dark suit of good material but it draped around him as though it hung from a skeleton. A diamond glinted blue fire from his bony and big-knuckled finger. He glanced around the room and sank down on the bed with a weary sigh. Idaho stopped just inside the door and leaned against the wall. Celestino moved so that he could watch the gunhawk with catlike intensity. King Baker passed a waxen hand across his dead white forehead.

"That was a nice little party you had at the Nugget, Pryor. Virginia City will talk about it for years to come."

"I reckon so," the Rio Kid said noncommittally. He remained standing by the table in the center of the room. Baker looked up and waved petulantly to a chair.

"Sit down, Pryor. I never carry a gun or a knife and Idaho knows better than to start trouble. I've already skinned him alive for the way he muddled things at the Nugget. You've ruined his pride, Rio Kid, but he won't do anything about it—now." He added the last word almost as an afterthought.

The Rio Kid sensed that this slight, cadaverous man was exceedingly dangerous. What he lacked in physical stamina he made up for in the sheer power of his evil brain. The Rio Kid sank down in the chair, but Celestino kept his dark eyes narrowly on Idaho Devlin.

"There were eight men killed at the Nugget," Baker said calmly as though reading dry statistics. "Ten wounded. Five of the dead and three of the wounded were my employees. It was a very costly evening, Pryor."

"I can't say I regret *your* loss," the Rio Kid answered. Baker smiled faintly.

"I'm aware of that. However, you are to blame in a way. It started when you commandeered my ferry at the Jefferson. My man, Grady, reported it to Idaho who proceeded to handle the situation in the usual manner. It was an error on his part, the more so since I had given specific orders that you were not to be molested until I had a chance to talk to you."

"Yuh're sure considerate," the Rio Kid said. Baker shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Only when I profit. I know why you've come to Montana Territory, Pryor, and I've heard a great deal about you from one source and another. I would find it much more profitable if you worked for me instead of against me. Tonight is an example."

Baker paused as if he expected the Rio Kid to answer. Idaho shifted restlessly by the door and Celestino became instantly tense. When the Rio Kid did not reply, King Baker sighed and continued.

"I have an excellent organization, Pryor. It works smoothly and efficiently in all departments. So I know that Brant Grossman sent for you. I know that Governor Ashley and General Custer are somewhere in the background. Your job is to stir up trouble along my road. I'm sure I'm correct."

"Then why come to me?" the Rio Kid demanded.

"Because I can save time. I'll know when I leave here exactly where you stand and I'll not waste time and money making passes in the dark. I can take care of any and all trouble that might

come along, one way or another. But fighting a man is expensive. I'd rather use a cheaper way."

"Such as?"

KING BAKER shrugged and smiled thinly at the Rio Kid.

"Hiring you, for instance—I prefer you as a friend, not as an enemy," he said. "Grossman, Ashley and Custer have made you a proposition and now I'll make mine. I suggest that you forget Grossman's promises. I have more power and money than he'll ever have. That goes for Ashley and Custer, too. I can make your trip up here worth twice as much as Grossman could ever pay you."

He reached inside his coat and pulled out a thick wallet. He opened it and placed five new one-thousand-dollar notes on the bed, fanning them out. He smiled at the Rio Kid. "That's yours—for a simple job, Pryor."

"Doing what?"

"Very simple and easy," Baker repeated. "In a few hours it will be dawn. You and your friend saddle up and ride back toward the Idaho line and out of Montana. The pay for that service is five thousand dollars."

The Rio Kid leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed and thoughtful. "Yuh make a heap of dinero, Baker, and yore toll road's a gold mine."

Baker visibly preened. "Admitted, Pryor, and I control Montana Territory. I control its commerce. I have a hand in its laws. I say this only as a warning to you, in case Grossman and his friends have misled you."

"Where did you get yore power, Baker?" the Rio Kid said with a thin edge to his voice. "Yuh've gained it by using dirty money for dirty purposes. Yuh've called in sidewinders like Idaho Devlin and they've done murder for yuh. Yuh've used fear like a whip, and yuh're proud of the whole, dirty, rotten mess!"

Baker's washed blue eyes stared unblinkingly at the Rio Kid and he gave no sign that the scathing words had even reached him. He coughed slightly touched the bills.

"That's neither here nor there, Pryor. Accept or refuse—now."

"Take that dinero and put it back in yore pocket," the Rio Kid snapped. "I want no part of it or of you. I intend to do what I can to break yore rule. Yuh'd better hire a whole new heap of gunslammers better'n Devlin. Yuh're going to need 'em."

Idaho choked angrily and pushed away from the wall. Instantly Celestino went into a crouch, his fingers taloning over his gun. Baker's eyes flicked toward his man.

"Keep your shirt on, Idaho. I'll give the word when I'm ready, not before."

"But yuh heard what he said! About me and you!"

"Fairly accurate," Baker nodded. He picked up the bills, evened their edges and looked once again at the Rio Kid as though giving him a last chance. Then he placed the bills carefully in his wallet and stood up. He nodded his head to the Rio Kid and moved to the door, signaling Idaho to go out ahead of him. At the door he swung around and the bloodless lips moved in a smile.

"You have just signed your death warrant, Pryor. Good night."

CHAPTER V

King's Highway

WHEN Baker and Idaho had left, Baker gently closing the door behind him, Celestino stared at the Rio Kid. He rubbed his hand along his jaw and his dark eyes shadowed. The Rio Kid knew what his friend was thinking.

"That gent don't waste words and he means every one he uses."

"*Si*, my General." Celestino shivered slightly. "It maybe best we keel heem quick, eh? Like the sidewinder before he seenk the lead fangs in us."

"I got the same hunch," the Rio Kid sighed and shook his head. "But we stand by the law. He's gotta make the first play."

"Me, I weesh I had four pair of eyes now I have met Keeng Baker. *Ai de mi*,

we'll need heem!"

The Rio Kid blew out the lamp and Celestino checked the bolt on the door. They undressed and went to bed but the Rio Kid thought of King Baker for a long time before he drifted off to sleep. He had never met a man before whose mere appearance gave such an impact of evil. Baker would be as hard as a slime covered eel to catch and bring to book. The Rio Kid sighed and at last his eyes closed.

He was awake at dawn, but already the heavy freight wagons rumbled along Virginia City's street. Before very long the two men were dressed and they had just finished when Lieutenant Arden knocked on the door. He looked sharply at them and grinned.

"You kicked up some dust last night, Captain. I'm sorry I missed it."

"Yore turn will come," the Rio Kid assured him.

"I hope so. I've heard a dozen different stories of the fight in the Nugget. Some of Baker's pretty boys won't bother us any more and people are beginning to think that maybe Baker's power can be broken. That's a good start."

The Rio Kid frowned. "At too high a price. Some good men were hurt last night. I'm glad I didn't start the ruckus. What have the Governor and Custer to say?"

Arden flushed slightly. "Well, I came in late last night."

"Della Grossman." The Rio Kid grinned. "She's a mighty pretty girl."

The young officer flushed and then grinned in acknowledgement. He sobered as he looked out the window.

"She's one reason why I want to help break King Baker. Governor Ashley acted mighty pleased this morning at the news. He intends to make good use of it here in Virginia City. He'll use the fight and the killing as an argument to drive King Baker and his gunhawks out. A few more incidents like this, he believes, and the legislature at Bannack will be forced to take notice of Baker's doings."

The Rio Kid didn't answer but finished combing his hair. He placed his campaign hat on his head and loosened the Colts in his holsters, turned to the door.

"We'll eat and then ride out. I reckon we can make some plans at the table."

In a few minutes they sat down at a table in the hotel dining room. A murmur of whispers arose at their entrance and the Rio Kid caught several swift, speculative glances cast his way. None of them were hostile. The three men ate breakfast in silence, loafing over their coffee until the dining room was almost empty. At last the Rio Kid leaned forward.

"If yuh were going to break a hole in King Baker's barrier, John, what section of his road would yuh pick?" he asked.

The young officer showed his pleasure at the use of his first name by the famous Rio Kid. He frowned at the far wall, carefully reviewing the long road across Montana.

"General Custer is at Fort Smith just below the Yellowstone," he said at last.

[*Turn page*]

...ITS QUALITY
HITS THE SPOT!

"The road crosses the Yellowstone a little north and east of Billings. Baker runs a ferry there, and he has nearly a company of gunslammers stationed close in case the Seventh Regiment decides not to pay the toll. Custer won't cause any trouble, but Baker's not certain. But, if the ferry and crossing was cleared of gunhawks, the General would find it easier to pursue Indians raiding to the south."

"Let me see a map," the Rio Kid suggested.

John Arden drew a paper and pencil from his pocket and swiftly sketched the road. His pencil made a big cross at the Yellowstone crossing and the Rio Kid carefully studied the map. He instantly saw the strategic importance of this ferry. If that link were knocked out, Baker's forces would be divided and Custer could move freely.

BUT the main objective, as the Rio Kid saw it, was to strike hard at the Montana Toll Company's gun control of the territory. Once the people knew that King Baker's renegades could be beaten at least that portion of the man's power would slip badly.

"Looks like the Yellowstone Crossing," the Rio Kid agreed. "It's a long way off and we'd better get to riding."

They returned to the hotel for their bedrolls. At the desk, the clerk extended an envelope to the Rio Kid. It bore his name in a harsh angular writing. The Rio Kid opened it and read the brief note. He looked at the clerk.

"Who delivered this?"

"One of the clerks from the Montana Toll Company. He said to make sure yuh got it."

The Rio Kid passed the note to Celestino and Lieutenant Arden. It was brief and to the point.

The offer made last night will continue until sundown this evening. This will give you more time to think it over and I hope that we can work together. If not—

It was unfinished, a silent repetition of the threat King Baker had made the night before. John Arden looked up, puzzled, and the Rio Kid told him of the visitor he had.

"Baker's plain persistent," he finished. He tapped the note. "But he won't make a move for a while and that gives us a jump on him."

The Rio Kid folded the letter and placed it in his pocket. He picked up his bedroll and left the hotel, heading directly for the stables.

In a very short while, the three men rode eastward out of Virginia City, climbing the slopes of the Tobacco Root Mountains. At a point where the road twisted around a high shoulder and out of sight of the town, John Arden drew rein. He looked back down into the gulch. His blue blouse was gone, replaced by a flannel shirt and his striped trousers were tucked into stout boots that bore blunt spurs. Without his insignia of rank and the trailing saber, he had none of the appearance of the cavalry officer.

"I didn't think Baker would even let us get out of town without some sort of trouble," he said as the Rio Kid reined in beside him.

"I didn't either," the Rio Kid answered. "And yuh can bet Baker knows we've left. But the gent is unpredictable and that makes him doubly dangerous.

"He'll use some Indian trick when we least expect it," Arden growled.

"We have met the Indian treek before, eh, my general?" Celestino smiled. The Rio Kid nodded.

"But there's always a new one, *amigo*. I have a hunch Baker knows 'em all."

They rode on and Virginia City disappeared behind them. They spent most of the day working their way through the mountains and camped late that night on the edge of the valley that sloped to the Madison River. They took turns in standing guard duty but there was no disturbance and dawn saw them on the trail again.

Now they headed almost due north. During the day they met several heavy freight wagons, some of them bearing the Bannack & Eastern sign. Just before noon, they approached a toll gate and the three men looked significantly at one another. Arden lifted the heavy Colt in his holster and let it drop back, ready for a swift, unobstructed draw.

The barrier was across the road as they approached and the Rio Kid's sharp eyes studied the little toll house where Baker's gunhawks should be lurking.

GENERAL GEORGE A. CUSTER

GENERAL CUSTER was probably the most dashing cavalry officer during the period of the Civil War. He was born December 5, 1839 at New Rumley, Ohio, received the usual education of a farm lad.

In 1857 he was appointed to West Point. Though keen and intelligent, Custer was mischievous. He graduated at the foot of a class of 34 on June 24, 1861 and was immediately appointed Second Lieutenant. After a year's service he was promoted to First Lieutenant. He came to McClellan's attention as a brave and resourceful officer during the Peninsular Campaign and Custer was promoted to Captain and aide to the General.

In 1863 his courage had earned him the brevet of Brigadier and he served with distinction at Gettysburg and through the Virginia Campaign. In 1864 he married his boyhood sweetheart, Elizabeth Bacon.

During that year Custer found favor with General Sheridan and was brevetted major-general. His swift pursuit of Lee from Richmond to Appomattox had a great deal to do with the Confederate general's surrender to Grant.

After the War, Custer dropped back to his regular rank of Captain but was soon promoted to the position of Lieutenant Colonel and placed in command of the famous Seventh Cavalry. He served brilliantly and well during the Indian campaigns on the Great Plains.

An impatient man, sure of his abilities, he made his one great and fatal mistake when he divided his forces and his own column attacked a huge band of Indians on the Little Big Horn. Custer lost his life with those of his men, going down before the overwhelming superiority of the Indian forces. Custer remains as an almost legendary figure of gallantry in American annals.

There was no sign of them.

They came up to the barrier and a man appeared in the toll house. He wore a gunbelt but there was nothing threatening about him. Celestino gave his attention to the shack as the man approached the Rio Kid to collect the toll. Arden's hand didn't stray far from his holster.

"Three dollars, gents," the man said easily. "Sure goin' to be a fine day."

The Rio Kid turned Saber to the schedule of tolls that hung on the wall of the shack. He appeared to read them, but his keen glance probed through the open doorway. No ambushers waited inside. Satisfied, he reined around and dropped the coins into the man's hand.

"Some charge more," he said easily. "How come?"

"Don't know. Mebbe it's because there's been more repairs and buildin' on other sections. I ain't had a raise at this station since it was built."

HE CRANKED up the barrier and the three men rode through. The barrier slowly descended behind them.

Arden's forehead was creased in a puzzled frown and he twisted around in the saddle, looking back at the toll house.

"I expected trouble," he said flatly. "It's not like Baker to let things ride."

"Maybe word hasn't come along the highway yet," the Rio Kid said thoughtfully.

Traffic was not as heavy as it had been the day before. For hours at a time they met no one. Late in the afternoon, Celestino spotted a rider coming fast behind them and still some distance away. The three slowed their pace to let the man catch up with them. At last he came up over a small rise.

The Rio Kid noted the marks of fast travel on the horse. The man wore nondescript clothing and a heavy gunbelt circled his waist. His slitted eyes were narrowed and his mouth was drawn down to one side. He topped the rise and instantly checked his horse. He suspiciously watched the three men and his glance shifted nervously from one man to the others.

The Rio Kid maneuvered Saber so that he blocked the road. The man caught the move and his eyes jumped swiftly from one side to the other as though seeking some means of escape. Celestino and John Arden had fanned out and the man realized that he was trapped. He smiled, no more than a nervous gesture of the lips.

"Howdy," he said.

The Rio Kid nodded. "Traveling fast," he said.

"Sure. I want to reach the ferry before it shuts down for the night. Got to be mighty far north of here by morning."

"King Baker's orders?" the Rio Kid asked pleasantly. A look of alarm flitted over the man's face to be wiped off in a second and replaced by a false puzzled expression.

"I don't savvy, mister. I'm just hurryin' along to a deal up north. Who's King Baker?"

The Rio Kid's eyes grew cold but his wide lips held the friendly smile. "King Baker owns the highway, he thinks. He hires gents like yuh on his payroll. Thought maybe yuh might know him."

"Not me, mister!" The man's voice quivered slightly and he gave Arden and Celestino a frightened glance. He licked his lips and looked longingly up the road. "I got a heap of miles to cover, gents, and I reckon I'd better head right along."

"Sure," the Rio Kid's smile grew wider. "Tell yore friends up north the Rio Kid's right behind yuh and looking forward to meeting them."

He pulled Saber aside to let the man pass. The renegade looked unhappy as though he realized that his back would be wide open to three guns when he had passed. He licked his lips again, nodded slightly to the Rio Kid and rode on. For a time his back was held stiff and tense as though braced to feel the shock of lead. It didn't come. He twisted around and the Rio Kid saw the lips twist into an angry grimace. Then the man set spurs and disappeared down the road in a cloud of dust. Lieutenant Arden came up beside the Rio Kid.

"That was Baker's messenger," he said tightly. "You should have held him up."

"On what grounds?" the Rio Kid demanded. "We knew that man was lying, and he knew we knew. He could have denied any connection with King Baker if we'd questioned him for hours. What proof could we have had one way or the other?"

"None," Arden admitted.

The Rio Kid chuckled. "He's sending the warning along the road, and probably has orders for a trap to be set for us. Every illegal move King Baker makes helps Ashley and Custer. It's what we want."

ARDEN subsided but he was not entirely convinced. A short time after sundown they came to a ferry, the boat pulled up and moored to the bank. A lamp glowed in a cabin built on the bank of the stream and the Rio Kid headed Saber into the hard packed yard. He dismounted and knocked on the door. Arden and Celestino held their mounts a distance back from the building, hands not far from their sixes. The door jerked open and a hulking man glowered at the Rio Kid.

"We want to cross," the Rio Kid said mildly.

"Ain't no more crossin'," the man

growled. "Yuh should have got here sooner."

"Couldn't make it."

"Then yuh can sit along the bank," the man stated gruffly.

ABRUPTLY he started to close the door, but the Rio Kid's boot toe prevented him.

"A public road is traveled all night. Seems like a ferry should, too."

"It don't. Company orders."

"Yuh mean King Baker's."

"All right, King's. Ain't no one going to buck 'em."

"I am. Yuh're taking us across *pronto*."

The man's eyes widened. With only that warning, he made a play for his gun. But his fingers had no more than wrapped around the walnut handle when the Rio Kid's Colt jammed into his stomach.

"I said we was changing the rules, friend. Head down to the boat."

The man flinched and his fingers jerked away from his gun as though it had been red hot. The Rio Kid lifted the weapon from the holster and flung it into the outer darkness. He motioned toward the river bank and the man stepped forward.

"Yuh won't get away with this, *hombre*. I'm reportin' it to King."

"I've been reported to King before. The handle's the Rio Kid."

He heard a choking sound but the man said nothing more. His stride lengthened and in a matter of minutes the three men and their mounts were aboard the ferry. It was pushed out from the bank and, by an ingenious method of pulleys, silently crossed the stream. The man worked feverishly and in double quick time the keel ground against the opposite bank.

Arden and Celestino preceded the Rio Kid off the boat. Saber gingerly moved after them. The dun's hoofs had no more than touched the bank than the boat moved out into the stream. The Rio Kid's firm voice followed it.

"Tell Baker he has changed his rules. Yuh remember it, too. If I hear of yuh closing up at sundown again, I'll be riding down to find out why."

His answer was a series of muttered curses that faded away as the boat moved out across the stream. The Rio Kid neck reined Saber and joined his companions.

"Another report to worry King Baker," he said as he came along beside Arden and Celestino.

"And another worry for me," Arden grunted, "until the shooting's over."

"I theenk maybe that come soon, eh?" Celestino asked softly and he didn't need an answer.

CHAPTER VI

Indian Attack

CLOSE to the river, they camped and once again took turns at guard duty. But the night passed as peacefully as the one before. The next day they passed two more toll gates and did not encounter any trouble. However, from the way in which the keepers regarded them, the Rio Kid knew that they were recognized and that word about them had come up from Virginia City. John Arden also recognized the signs.

"Blamed funny we haven't had to fight our way across a toll gate."

"Not at all," the Rio Kid said. "King Baker's smart enough to know that we'd expect trouble and be ready for it then. He's a shrewd *hombre* and savvys how a man thinks. He'll try to catch us off guard."

"Might be," Lieutenant Arden conceded. "But my shoulder blades itch every time I turn my back on one of those gates. You know, Pryor, I've been wishing I could buck King Baker ever since I came to the Territory."

"Because he cripples the army's movements?" the Rio Kid asked, "or because of a certain lady I met."

Arden flushed and then grinned, his eyes lighting up. "Maybe both, Captain. Have you ever seen anyone as pretty as Della?"

The Rio Kid considered it carefully, a twinkle in his eyes. "No, I reckon I

ain't," he said gravely. "She's a mighty fine girl."

"I met her a year ago at Billings," Arden said. "I was on patrol duty in that section and had taken a liberty in the town. There was a dance and Della was there. It still surprises me that a girl like her should be interested in a second lieutenant. My yearly pay ain't much above a teamster's on one of her father's wagons."

"It ain't usually how much a man makes that interests a girl. Sometimes I think they get a foresight of a man's future some way, the sort of gent he'll turn out to be. Sometimes they're wrong, but more often they ain't."

John Arden considered the opinion, then shrugged his shoulders. "I hope you're right, Captain. I'm due for a promotion next year and a change of station—maybe down into Arizona. As soon as this King Baker deal is over, I'm going to ask Della to marry me."

"I figure she'll take yuh up," the Rio Kid said. "Yuh're a lucky man, John."

They moved to the side of the road to let a heavy freight wagon rumble by, and the conversation was not renewed again. By easy stages, they reached one of the forks of the Missouri and crossed on a new toll bridge. Now the road turned eastward and, a few miles further on would turn gradually south as it reached toward Bozeman.

Just before sundown, the Rio Kid found a camping place that was ideal, in the lee of a small hill, a grove of trees cutting off the chill night wind. The fire was built and supper cooked. Then the three men lay at ease as the flames subsided to embers, a red unwinking glow in the starlit night. The Rio Kid had just set the guard schedule when he tensed and listened into the night.

Celestino instantly caught his alarm, and, with a few swift moves of his feet and kicking dirt across the embers. The red eyes instantly winked out. Celestino started to move toward the sound but the Rio Kid checked him.

"Yuh and John stay here. Make a few sounds but keep low. It might give me a chance to get a look."

The Rio Kid faded off into the darkness. He heard Saber stir restlessly and he circled the horses, going at a crouch. A few yards out from the camp he stopped, and listened. He heard a low call, Celestino's voice, and the Rio Kid grinned in the darkness. The skulkers would believe their quarry near the fire, prepared for an attack.

The Rio Kid continued a wide, cautious circle around the camp site. He halted suddenly when he heard a slight rustle to his left. Instantly, his sixes snaked from leather and his keen eyes peered into the darkness. He heard the sound again, closer this time. The Rio Kid faded into the shadow of a spruce and waited.

SO SUDDENLY it was almost startling, a dark form slithered close to the tree. The Rio Kid could hear the suppressed, excited breathing of the man. His muscles tensed and he rested his weight on the balls of his feet.

Suddenly he lunged outward, guns leveled. Instantly the man whirled with a surprised grunt. He moved in a split-second blur. The Rio Kid started to dog back the gun hammers, but the man's shoulder rammed into his chest. He caught the Rio Kid off balance and Pryor staggered back. One of the sixes exploded but the Rio Kid had missed the skulker.

There was a swift flurry and the man disappeared into the darkness as swiftly as he had appeared. Pryor caught his balance and plunged in pursuit. He raced ahead for several yards, brush whipping across his face, swinging around the tall dark trunks of the trees. Then he stopped, realizing that his quarry could be hiding within a foot of him and never be discovered in this Stygian darkness.

Celestino and John Arden would be waiting to hear from him and they might run into trouble of their own. The Rio Kid strained his ears but heard no sound other than the slight whisper of the wind high in the trees. The man was gone—and for good.

He holstered his sixes and started back toward the camp. He heard Saber's nicker and the Rio Kid called out his name. Celestino's answer came from close at hand.

"*Por dios,* my General, I have the seen

lined on you. Did you get thees sneaker, eh?"

"He got away," the Rio Kid answered. "Sure as shooting, it was one or more of Baker's men. They got something planned."

"Maybe we'd better move out," Arden suggested.

"A good idea. They'll attack an empty camp in the dark, if that's their plan."

In a few swift and efficient moves, the three men moved away from the camp site, climbing the hill slope. At last the Rio Kid discerned a ring of high boulders that crowned the hill, and within the ring was a space that would shelter horses and men. They tethered the horses and the Rio Kid took the first watch. He moved silently around the circle of rocks, peering down the slope into the night. The starlight was faint and tricky and the Rio Kid wished for a full moon. Celestino and John Arden rolled up in their blankets, sleeping while they had the chance.

THERE was no further disturbance but the Rio Kid was not lulled into a sense of false security. He knew the prowlers were King Baker's men and he knew that something was afoot. An attack might come at any moment and the Rio Kid wanted to be prepared for it. The hours passed and then John Arden took over the watch.

The Rio Kid rolled into his blankets and went almost instantly to sleep. He had learned long ago that a man gained nothing by lying awake and tense. He slept soundly and instantly awakened when Celestino touched his shoulder. The young Mexican grinned down at him.

"Eet is soon dawn, my General. There has been nothing happen."

The Rio Kid arose. It was still dark but there was a suggestion of light along the eastern sky, hardly more than a promise that the day would come. The Rio Kid made a circuit of the rocks again and all looked peaceful.

"Can we start a breakfast fire?" John Arden asked.

"I reckon we can. If Baker's men are around, they know where we are. Daylight will expose us pretty soon anyhow."

The Rio Kid did sentry duty while Celestino and Arden built a fire and cooked a quick breakfast. The hot coffee was warming to bones chilled by the cold night. At last blankets were rolled and the little party was ready to start on the trail again.

The Rio Kid cautiously led the way out beyond the protection of the rocks. His keen eyes probed at every possible cover for a lurking enemy. They slowly descended the slope and reached their former campsite. The road lay two or three hundred yards beyond through a grove of spruce.

They had almost reached the trees when the Rio Kid saw a bush quiver slightly. Instantly his sixes flashed out and he sent a slug crashing into the heart of the foliage. A bronzed body jerked upright and fell threshing.

The Rio Kid wheeled Saber as guns blazed and a savage yell lifted from the bushes. Celestino's six was in action and John Arden fired with the trained, deadly precision of a soldier. The nearest protection was the ring of rocks the three trail partners had just abandoned and the Rio Kid headed Saber for them.

But their attackers had already made a counter move. A band of Indians swept around the base of the hill, racing to cut between the Rio Kid and the rocks. The fire behind him mounted in fury and bullets sang around him like angry bees. Saber's mirled eye flashed and he needed no urging. He plunged for the rocks, his hoofs flashing.

It became a grim and desperate race. The Indian ponies cut at a sharp angle around the hill and more of them plunged from concealment in the bushes behind the little party of whites. The Rio Kid's guns roared and thundered. An Indian dropped from his saddle, a second swayed, grabbed for a hold and missed. He fell rolling along the ground and didn't move.

The line of Indians and the three racing whites converged. The Rio Kid grimly realized that the race was almost lost. If he could break up the Indian charge, his friends might reach the protection of the rocks. A slight knee pressure swerved Saber. The dun no longer raced for the hill, but charged directly at the closest Indians. The sheer bold-

ness of the sudden attack threw the Indians off balance. They swerved, checked the headlong speed of their ponies.

In a thunder of hoofs and a blasting, deadly roar of his guns, the Rio Kid struck the leading Indians. Saber's shoulder struck a pony, sent horse and rider headlong. A slug smashed squarely into a red, painted face. Saber's yellow teeth ripped hide and flesh from the flank of another animal and it screamed in terror and pain. Guns flashed in the Rio Kid's face and he heard the whisper of the lead, felt the heat of the muzzle blast.

No one sound predominated. There was only the confused roar of fighting men and blazing guns. A hot brand streaked across the Rio Kid's arm. Saber reared upward, hoofs flashing in deadly strokes. The dun wheeled, the Rio Kid clinging to his back, guns silenced for the moment.

Celestino and Arden found their way to the rocks open before them and safety lay behind the granite masses. But they would not accept their friend's sacrifice. They swung around and their own guns blasted into the milling melee. It was the thing that broke the Indian charge. There was a moment or two of milling, fighting indecision and then the Indians broke back down the hill. Saber came rushing up the slope.

"Head for the rocks," the Rio Kid's voice rose in a shout.

CELESTINO and Arden wheeled their mounts and pounded up the slope. They reached the ring of boulders, vaulted from the saddles. They threw themselves flat, guns menacing the slope.

There was just enough dawn light that the three men could see indistinct huddled shapes. Beyond them the dark bulk of the trees shielded the attackers. The Rio Kid heard threshings, the snapping of bushes and then all was silent. Celestino rubbed a powder burn on his cheek.

"Thees Indian, he's fight good, eh?"

"Best I've ever seen 'em," Arden growled, "and I've fought a few since I come to Montana."

"They're not Indians," the Rio Kid said quietly and the others looked at him in surprise. He held up his hand. "Listen."

Noises still came from below, shouts, confused sounds. Then very clearly a blasting, ripping oath. The Rio Kid's brows raised quizzically and he gave his friends a twisted smile.

"First I knew profanity was an Indian language."

Arden thoughtfully rubbed his finger along his jaw. "They had me fooled."

"And me for awhile," the Rio Kid acknowledged. "Until I got right close. One of those dead 'Indians' out there has a beard."

"Then the prowlers last night—" Arden started to say.

"Were sent to scout us out and locate us. That's why they didn't offer fight. King Baker wanted this to look like an Indian attack from start to finish."

"But why, my General?" Celestino asked.

"Baker plays every angle. There might be a chance that one or all of us might escape his renegade guns. It wouldn't do for any of the killers to be identified and hooked into Baker's pay roll. So, they used stain and feathers, war-paint and buckskin. Get set! I think we'll have some more powder smoke."

Sudden silence enveloped the men below. Arden slipped to the horses and came running back with rifles and bandoliers. The Rio Kid settled himself more comfortably, sprawled out behind the rock, the rifle cuddled to his cheek.

The dawn light grew stronger and now the Rio Kid could see the outline of the bushes beneath the trees. Nothing moved but the Rio Kid felt the tenseness in the air.

A crash of rifle fire ripped the wilderness quiet into shreds. Bullets smashed against the rocks, whined high. The Rio Kid held his fire, waiting for a tangible target. The renegade fire increased in fury. Then, as the bullets still blasted against the rocks, the disguised horsemen appeared. They approached at a long angle, riding low, charging up the crest.

Instantly the Rio Kid's rifle went into action. He fired, worked the lever and fired again. A man spilled from his mount, a horse went down in a threshing

ing tangle of legs. Celestino and Arden's rifles joined in the chorus. None of them hurried, each placing his shots with utmost effectiveness. Three more men tumbled but by now the renegades were dangerously close to the rock ramparts.

The Rio Kid discarded the rifle and again his Colts swept from leather. The time had come for close and deadly six-gun work. The Rio Kid's jaw set at a grim, fighting angle and he braced himself for the final moment when the renegades would pour over and through the barricade. His sixes bucked back against his palms. Powdersmoke clung low to the rocks, swirled in blinding clouds.

The renegades came closer and the three defenders poured a deadly fire into them. Then, like a wave whose force is spent, the charge faltered, wavered for an indecisive moment and broke back down the hill in a ragged, fleeing line. Five more sprawled figures lay on the ground.

Silence again settled over the rocks and the slopes below. The Rio Kid threw a hasty glance at his friends. Celestino seemed unharmed but John Arden's cheek had been bullet ripped. The whole side of his face was bloody but he didn't seem to realize that he had been hit.

The Rio Kid went to work on the wound and soon had the blood washed away with water from the canteen. The bullet had furrowed the skin and flesh, doing no more harm. It was patched up and the three kept a sharp watch from the rocks. There was no sign from the renegades but the Rio Kid was content to keep low. As the time passed, John Arden became impatient.

"They've gone," he stated flatly. The Rio Kid shook his head.

"Not yet. There's some dead men out there they don't dare leave behind. They won't leave until after dark."

ARDEN subsided but he looked as though he couldn't quite agree with the Rio Kid. More time passed and at last Arden cautiously raised his head above the rocks. Nothing happened and the young officer edged around the boulder.

"Get back," the Rio Kid snapped.

At the same moment a rifle blasted from below. The bullet whipped rock dust into Arden's face and he scurried back to safety. He grinned at the Rio Kid, looking a little foolish.

"I should have known you'd be right."

The three men settled down for the rest of the day. The Rio Kid did not believe that the renegades would set up a siege of their barricade, but merely wait for nightfall. After what seemed a long eternity, the sun tipped the western peaks and sank rapidly behind them. Twilight came into the valley on long purple ribbons of shadow. The bushes grew indistinct and disappeared and the trees were no more than a dark band of Stygian shadow in the night.

Almost instantly the Rio Kid heard a secretive stir at the foot of the hill. Arden and Celestino tensed and the Rio Kid sent them a warning whisper.

"Let them start if they want gun smoke. But I don't think they do."

The muted noises continued, keeping the three men alert as the night wore on. Then the soft shufflings stopped. The Rio Kid waited, eyes strained into the darkness. Midnight passed and nothing had disturbed the silence. At last the Rio Kid pushed back from the rock and stood up.

"They've gone. We won't be bothered for awhile, I reckon. At least not until King Baker has figured up some new sidewinding trick."

CHAPTER VII

Mountain Man

IT SOON became obvious that the Rio Kid was right. They moved out from the rocks the next morning without a challenge. The sprawled shapes had disappeared, carried off in the night. The Rio Kid had scored a definite victory over King Baker but he knew it was no time for elation. The man would strike again and the fight for the toll road control had only just begun.

The three men traveled eastward. At the various toll stops and ferry crossings, they were sharply eyed but there was never any direct challenge. They met a few of the stubble-faced gunhawk breed but these men gave the Rio Kid and his companions a wide berth, careful not to cause trouble.

It wasn't natural. The way eastward was too smooth when there were twenty or more places that King Baker could have caused trouble. At last they reached Billings and cut southward off the road to distant Fort Smith.

They reached the military post finally. Fort Smith was, at this time, Headquarters of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment and the hub of General Custer's operations. It nestled at the northern foot of the Big Horn Mountains, close to the forks of a river by the same name.

This was pleasant country, rich and rolling. Its grass could support innumerable herds, the Rio Kid saw. If Custer could once subdue the wild Sioux tribes, this whole area would become wealthy beyond the imagination.

The three companions rode into Fort Smith just after the morning gun had roared a salute to the rising flag. They watched the long, stiff lines of the cavalry companies break up, wheel and ride to their individual barracks and stables. It gave the Rio Kid a thrill to see the ordered ranks of the blue uniforms. For many years that had been his life.

They rode across the parade ground and dismounted before the Headquarters building. The Rio Kid gave his name to an orderly who reappeared in a few minutes. The three men were instantly ushered into Custer's office. The General grinned at them.

"I hear King Baker's been having trouble," he said abruptly. "I heard his gunhawks got in a big fight in Virginia City and several men were killed and more wounded. Ashley heard about it, too, and the Legislature is beginning to wonder about Baker."

"Is that all?" the Rio Kid asked. He sat down wearily.

"Not quite all. Seems like the folks in the southern area are writing hot letters to Bannack. They're complaining about the tolls and the poor condition of the roads. Word's spread that Baker's rates have been challenged and some of his gunhawks downed. He's having a hard time keeping his prestige and his crooked politicians in line. They're beginning to count the votes they might lose because of the trouble."

"It's a good start, but not enough," the Rio Kid said.

"It's the first crack," Custer chuckled. "A few more of them, a few more fights like the one at Virginia City and public opinion will start to crumble King's empire."

"I can give you the story of another fight right now." The Rio Kid swiftly outlined the story of the siege of the rocks. Custer listened, his eyes growing cold and his jaw jutting out in a fighting angle. When it was finished, his fist slammed onto the desk.

"The dirty skunk! Too bad we can't prove anything." His face cleared and he shrugged. "At least we can spread the true story of what happened. It won't take long reaching everybody and it'll be that much more ammunition for Governor Ashley at Bannack. What do you plan next?"

"I figure I'll open the Yellowstone Crossing to the public and to the Army, General. I hear it's important enough to Baker that he keeps a sizable crew of killers there."

Custer glanced at the map, his face thoughtful. He made no comment but picked up a bell and rang for the orderly. His voice was crisp and decisive as he gave his orders.

"I'd like to see Bridger here right away. Tell him he'll be traveling."

Custer leaned back in his chair and looked at the map again. "You've got a good plan, Captain. You might have to move fast and quick and I'm giving you a man who knows every blade of grass in Montana. Jim Bridger's an old man but he's valuable."

The Rio Kid nodded. "I've worked with Jim before. There's none better."

THE DOOR opened and a stooped old man entered. His face was leathery and broken into a thousand wrinkles. He was almost toothless but his quick, beady eyes had the alert light of a man forty years his junior.

He wore a flat crowned hat and his gray hair escaped from under it to hang

around his shoulders. He wore a flannel shirt, the collar circled by a knotted bandanna. Ancient tough buckskin trousers covered his spindly legs and his feet were encased in moccasins. He carried a rifle that had been obsolete in the armed services for over a decade but the Rio Kid knew the old man was deadly with the ancient weapon. Jim Bridger looked around the circle and he grinned when he saw the Rio Kid.

"Wagh! You're a sight for sore eyes. Ain't seen yuh since we had that fracas in Corinne y'ars ago. How floats yore stick?"

"Yore way, Jim." The Rio Kid accepted the man's outthrust hand. "Reckon yuh could use another good fight?"

"Shucks, that's all I've ever done, seems like," Bridger said with a pleased grin. He patted the old single shot rifle. "I can still hit what Betsy notches in her sight."

"Jim," Custer said, "I'm assigning you to Captain Pryor. He might need to use some of those old cut-offs and Indian trails in a hurry. You're to guide him."

"Injuns again?"

"Not this time," the Rio Kid said. "A heap worse. Human snakes are infesting a highway, Jim, and poisoning the whole Territory. That's our game this time."

Custer arose from the desk. "I think that you'd better make Billings your headquarters, Pryor. It's close to the Yellowstone Crossing and King Baker has a branch office there. He's sure to go to Billings if trouble breaks on this section of his road."

"It's going to break," the Rio Kid said firmly.

"I'm so sure of it that I'm going to Billings with you," Custer agreed. "I can't take any official action, but I can help all I can behind the scenes. Besides, I want to be close around when the showdown comes."

General Custer allowed them only a short rest, assigning them quarters in a house on Officer's Row. The Rio Kid spent most of the time talking to old Jim Bridger, asking shrewd questions about the roads and trails.

The man's knowledge of the country was astounding. Despite his advanced age, Jim Bridger showed no trace of senility or forgetfulness. For forty years he had trapped, traded and fought Indians over this country. If he had visited a place just once, Jim Bridger never forgot it. His mind retained an almost photographic imprint of every tree, rock and shrub, every trail and path in and out. This had made him invaluable in the past to the Army, with whom he held the position of Chief of Scouts on the Plains.

While the little group rested, General Custer worked hard at clearing his desk so that he could leave Fort Smith for an indefinite period. The Sioux Indians were restless and Custer sensed that before very long he would have to conduct a full fledged campaign against them. He looked forward to it. As the youngest general in the Army and a military genius, he had earned the jealous hatred of the older, more plodding commanders. They worked against him in Washington and had lately hinted that Custer could not keep the Montana-Wyoming frontier peaceful.

Custer ached to take the field and prove them wrong, but if he was to be unhampered, then King Baker's toll road barrier must be broken. So Custer worked hard to clear away the details and ride to Billings with the Rio Kid. Unknown to the golden-haired commander, he was shaping events and clearing the way for his own courageous death on the Little Big Horn, not far away.

BY NOON, Custer's work was done. He joined his friends at the officer's mess. An orderly had their horses waiting for them when they left the hall and Custer instantly headed for Billings. They camped out that night and arrived in the small frontier town late the following night. All but Jim Bridger took rooms in the hotel. The old scout put up with a friend of the fur trading days.

"From now on, I stay low," Custer warned the Rio Kid as he left him for the night. "Officially, I won't know a thing that happens between you and King Baker. But I'll back every play you make as far as I can without showing my own hand."

"That's enough, General."

"Good luck," Custer said with a grin. "I think you'll keep me entertained while I'm in Billings."

EARLY the next day the Rio Kid and Celestino looked over the town. There wasn't much to it, though it showed signs of growing. The Rio Kid saw that the Bannack & Eastern Lines had a big corral and warehouse at the eastern end of the town. The Montana Toll Company's office was appropriately situated near a saloon and across the street from the stout little jail.

"That saloon will be the renegade hangout," the Rio Kid said and Celestino nodded.

"Maybe we pay heem a visit, eh?"

"It's in the cards, *amigo*."

After looking over the town, the Rio Kid returned to his box like hotel room. Arden was anxious for action and the Rio Kid quieted his impatience. There was no use striking at the small fry or making a move before the Rio Kid was familiar with the town. He took a seat by the window.

It overlooked the main street and the Rio Kid could watch every person who entered or left the Montana Toll Company office. He had a clear view of the saloon next door. He saw several of the gunhawk breed during the morning. A few flashily dressed drummers entered, to remain only a few minutes in each instance. The Rio Kid broke off his watch to eat with his friends in the hotel dining room.

He had no more than taken his position at the window again, when a small band of armed riders rode in from the east. They were a hard-case lot, heavily armed with sixes and rifles. They formed a guard around a small wagon that pulled up to a hitchrack before the Montana Toll Company.

The Rio Kid's eyes narrowed and a hard glint came into them when he saw Idaho Devlin. The black clad renegade spread his men out around the wagon at the hitchrack and, at his orders, two of the men helped the driver carry a heavy chest into the office.

"The dinero from the toll houses and ferries," the Rio Kid said. He turned to Arden and jerked his finger toward the group below. "I reckon Idaho Devlin makes a little action worth while."

There was a slight scratching on the door panel and it instantly swung open. Jim Bridger strode in. His sharp eyes studied the group at the window and he gave the bunched renegades a swift, comprehensive glance. He spat to one side.

"Wagh! Sneak killers, all of 'em. I been scoutin' considerable around the town."

"Learn anything?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Little." The old man sat down on the bed. "The local sheriff is Scar Eggers. Seems King Baker notched him for the job and brought in a heap of his onery skunks on election day. Eggers is King Baker's beaver and there's no doubt of it. Yuh better watch him whatever yuh do."

"What do folks think of Baker?"

"They don't know him much personal, but they sure hate every squar' inch of his hide. His gun-toters think Billings belongs to them and thar's a whole passel of decent folks figger different. They ain't worked up enough backbone to buck Baker yet, though. Most they hate a man named Devlin. Heard he'd killed three-four upstanding town citizens. Not much reason."

The Rio Kid digested the information and his clear eyes lighted. It looked as if Billings needed only an incident to turn against the gunhawks, some little thing that would break their fear of hired guns. The Rio Kid began to lay his plans accordingly.

He made his first move that night. Most of the stores had closed and light showed only from the two saloons along the street. The Star was the noisiest and the Rio Kid tagged it as the hangout of the renegades. He left the hotel with his friends and crossed the dusty street.

"Jim, you and Arden stay by the hitchrack and keep yore guns ready. Celestino and me'll go inside. I aim to singe King Baker a little bit, and his boys might cause trouble."

"It'd be safer if we went along," Arden dissented. "The place is filled with gunhawks."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "Too many of us is a direct challenge. I'll

handle this my way, John. Yore turn will come later."

RELUCTANTLY, John Arden moved over toward the hitchrack with Bridger. The Rio Kid mounted the few steps, Celestino a couple of paces behind him. Noise and light streamed out over the batwings and no one paid much attention to the two newcomers.

The Rio Kid pushed through the batwings. The place was crowded and most of them were King Baker's men. The Rio Kid saw Devlin's black covered shoulders at the bar. Celestino remained by the doors while the Rio Kid walked boldly into the room. A renegade turned from a table and looked directly at the Rio Kid. His eyes widened in stunned surprise and his mouth dropped open.

"Idaho!" he yelled above the noise.

Instantly the place became quiet. Idaho turned, faintly curious. Then he saw the Rio Kid and he froze, a foolish look of surprise on his face. The Rio Kid did not break his easy stride, made no move toward his guns. The renegades stared at him. They could not believe that a single man could walk into their own stronghold. It threw them off balance and they looked to Idaho for a lead.

Idaho was as astounded as the rest of them. The Rio Kid halted a few paces before him. His cold gray eyes cut around the room. He saw a scattering of men who obviously were citizens of the town and he knew they'd spread word of whatever happened here tonight.

"Yuh've played things wide and handsome, Devlin," the Rio Kid said clearly. "You and King Baker. The last time we met, you and yore boys was dressed up like Injuns and tried to do a job of triple murder."

Idaho swallowed but still couldn't get his voice. The Rio Kid went on at the same easy drawl, that held a knife edge of warning beneath it.

"Yuh've done murder time and again. But yore day is about over, Idaho. And so is King Baker's. Might be best if you was to take yore boys and ride clean out of Montana. I'm just giving yuh a warning before things bust wide open. If the citizens don't string yuh up, yuh'll run into a gunsmoke showdown."

Once more the Rio Kid's cold glance cut around the silent room. "It's yore last waring, Idaho. Tell Baker yuh're leaving."

He turned on his heel and walked unhurriedly back to the batwings. He pushed through them. Celestino gave the stunned crowd a sweeping glance and his white teeth flashed in a wide grin. He turned on his heel and the batwings swung emptily behind him. Tense silence still held the room.

CHAPTER VIII

Barriers Down

UPON REACHING the street, the Rio Kid signaled to Arden and Bridger and the little group returned to the hotel. The Rio Kid did not light the lamp but moved through the darkness to the open window where he could watch the Star Saloon.

Suddenly the batwings burst open and Idaho Devlin stormed out into the street. He checked his headlong rush and looked angrily in first one direction and then the other. Men edged out behind him and stood waiting, watching the swart gunhawk. Idaho slowly turned.

"He's run," he said loudly. He swaggered back to the saloon and shoved through the crowd, disappearing inside. Most of them followed him but the Rio Kid saw three or four men move quietly away down the street. John Arden, peering over the Rio Kid's shoulder, growled deep in his throat.

"You should have gone down there after him."

"Not yet." The Rio Kid chuckled. He pointed to the fading figures of those who had left the saloon. "They'll spread word that Idaho Devlin was bluffed in his own den. I want folks to talk and the story will grow bigger as it spreads. Arden, there's just four of us and there's a heap of gents over Montana just like Idaho and King Baker. We

can't fight 'em all. We can only show up a few of them as bluffing cowards. Once word spreads, people will get confidence in themselves. We won't be needed. They'll kill their own snakes."

John Arden was silent. After awhile the Rio Kid lighted the lamp and the four made plans for the next day. Bridger and Arden left, and the Rio Kid and Celestino prepared for bed.

Early the next morning the four men rode out of Billings, headed for the distant Yellowstone. The Star was closed and none of the renegades were about as the Rio Kid rode by. Billings soon dropped behind them and the Rio Kid settled in the saddle for the long ride. Saber was eager to go and the Rio Kid had to hold a firm rein on the wiry dun to hold its pace to that of the other horses.

Old Jim Bridger pointed out several landmarks to them as they rode along. They passed a heavy freight wagon and the driver nodded curtly to them, scowling darkly.

A mile further they came to a toll gate and, even from a distance, the Rio Kid could see that something was afoot. He felt a slight shiver go down the broad black stripe on Saber's back, a sure sign of danger.

"Trouble ahead," he said quietly.

As they approached, the Rio Kid saw that a big freight wagon stood on the far side of the barrier. The toll house was unusually large and about six of the gunhung renegades, so prevalent along the road, were bunched near the gate. As the Rio Kid drew closer, he heard a rough voice raised in protesting anger.

He could see that the gunhawks made a rough half circle around a teamster and the toll keeper. The teamster shook his fist high above his head and his thick body fairly trembled with anger.

"You blasted skunks raise the price whenever yuh feel like it. Yuh're asking four dollars more through this gate than I paid the last time I went through."

"We gotta repair the road," the toll keeper said in a whining voice. The teamster stared at him, then threw back his head and laughed. He sobered and his thick finger stabbed at the man.

"Repair, yuh say! There's chuckholes in this road ain't been touched in three years. There's one place a creek has washed out and it threatens to capsize a wagon every time yuh go over it. Yuh're lying. There ain't no repairs. King Baker just wants some more dinero in his pocket."

"Don't gabble with him, Pete," one of the gunhawks snapped. The teamster whirled, face working.

"Keep out of this. Yore kind thinks yuh rule the whole blasted Territory. Yuh don't, and yuh'll blamed soon learn it!"

"Yuh won't be around to know about it, *hombre,*" the gunhawk said through set lips.

Without warning his hand dropped to his holster, blurred upward. The gun blasted and roared and the slug slapped heavily into the teamster's chest. His bulky body jerked spasmodically and his eyes grew wide. His lips moved but no sound issued. He suddenly fell in a heap, limp and lifeless.

"Yuh shouldn't have been so swift," the toll keeper whined.

"He had too big a mouth, Pete. King don't like folks who beef about the tolls."

THE Rio Kid dismounted. Celestino hastily slid out of the saddle and John Arden, thin-lipped, followed after the two partners. The Rio Kid's broad shoulders thrust two of the gunhawks aside. He slid under the toll gate and straightened. He whirled the gunhawk around and his fist smashed flush into the man's face. The gunhawk shot backward, arms flailing. He hit the ground beside the dead teamster and stared up in utter amazement at the angry man in blue who stood over him.

"Get up," the Rio Kid said through set teeth. "Make yore play with guns or fists."

The renegade blinked at him. He lifted his hand to his face and brought it way covered with blood. He stared uncomprehendingly at his palm. His brain began to function and his eyes glowed balefully. He came to his feet.

"Gun him down," he choked an order.

"Not so fast, *senores,*" Celestino's voice lifted in a clear warning.

The gunhawks whirled, hands slashing down to their holsters. The leader faded to one side, making a swift play for his Colt. The Rio Kid's hands blurred and came up, blue steel sixes blasting flame and lead. The bullets hit the renegade before his gun was half lifted. Their impact spun him half around and he seemed to tangle in his own feet.

His six dropped, unfired and he fell headlong across the dead teamster. The toll keeper squeaked with fear and threw himself flat. He started wiggling away, his white face strained by stark terror. The Rio Kid wheeled, joining in the fight between his two friends and the three remaining gunslammers.

Celestino had downed one and Arden's slug caught a second just as the Rio Kid turned. Bridger's long rifle boomed and a neat round hole appeared between another renegade's eyes. The remaining two threw down their guns and jerked their hands upward.

"We done had enough," one of them choked.

The Rio Kid advanced on them with blazing eyes. Their frightened look dropped beneath his angry stare. He picked up their guns and pitched them far to one side. He gave a quick order to Celestino.

"Get the toll keeper before he wears a hole in his shirt crawling along that way."

The young Mexican jerked the trembling toll keeper to his feet and placed him beside the two gunhawks. Jim Bridger calmly reloaded his old rifle and looked with critical judgement at the man he had downed.

"I can still put a hole where I want to," he said dryly, and seemed satisfied.

"Get a spade and shovel," the Rio Kid snapped to his prisoners. "Yuh got four graves to dig. I hope one of yuh killing sons tries to make a run for it. I'm aching to use these sixes. Celestino, yuh watch 'em."

The Rio Kid turned to the teamster, dragging the body of the gunhawk from atop of him. The man was dead, shot squarely through the heart. The Rio Kid found bills of lading for his cargo, assigned to merchants in Billings and Bozeman. He was a Bannack & Eastern driver. The Rio Kid straightened.

"We'll stake out the hosses and leave the wagon beside the road. I'll pin a note to the seat. One of his partners will drive through before long and Brant Grossman will know what to do."

The three captives sweated behind the toll house but at last they had the graves dug to Celestino's satisfaction. The bodies were placed in them and soon four silent mounds bore mute evidence to the gun battle. Once more the two renegades and the toll keeper stood before the Rio Kid. He glared at the gunhawks.

"Yuh got a chance to get out of the Territory. If I ever see yuh again, it'll be over a gunsight. Saddle up and head out, *pronto.*"

The two men wheeled and fairly raced for their mounts in the small corral behind the toll house. The Rio Kid turned his attention to the toll keeper. The mousy little man trembled slightly.

"Head back to Billings and tell King Baker what's happened out here," the Rio Kid ordered. "Tell him if there's any trouble about this, I'll be in Billings myself."

"Yuh can't blame me. I—just got a job here. I have to charge the tolls. The gun-throwers was Baker's idea."

"I don't blame yuh," the Rio Kid said. "I blame King Baker for being greedy and trying to grab up everything he can. I reckon there's some toll companies that are honest and charge a reasonable fee. I reckon they keep up the roads and birdges. But Baker's another breed and the honest companies are getting the blame for what he does. Baker's on his way out. Now head for Billings and tell the story straight."

AT TOP speed the toll keeper scurried toward the corral after the two gun-slammers. The Rio Kid and Celestino unhitched the teams from the freight wagon and turned them into the corral. John Arden worked the crank that lifted the toll barrier and the Rio Kid printed a note in bold black letters that he nailed to the toll house wall. He stepped back and grinned at Celestino and John Arden.

"I reckon that'll make things clear."

Arden read:

PASS FREE OF TOLL UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. REPORT PRESENCE OF GUNSLAMMERS OR ANY OVERCHARGE TO BOB PRYOR, THE RIO KID. HE WILL CORRECT THE SAME.

Jim Bridger came striding around the corner of the building. He jerked his calloused thumb over his shoulder. "Our friends has done hit the trail for Billings."

The four men mounted and rode eastward. Some distance away, the Rio Kid turned in the saddle and looked backward. The toll gate, high in the air, made a black line against the sky and the highway was open to all who cared to travel. It seemed a symbol to the Rio Kid of the ultimate end of men like King Baker.

Not many miles away, they met another wagon of the Bannack & Eastern Lines.

The Rio Kid stopped it and told the teamster of what had happened at the toll house.

The man listened in stony silence but his eyes lighted when the Rio Kid told of the death of the gunhawk.

"I'll take care of everything," he promised, gathering up the reins. "If yuh hadn't smoked down that killer, I'd sure be huntin' him out."

The wagon rumbled westward and the four men continued the trail toward the Yellowstone. They were prepared for trouble when they reached the Yellowstone ford. But there was only the toll keeper at the barrier and a single man of the pinch-eyed breed. The Rio Kid swung out of Saber's saddle and instantly confronted the man.

"There's three of yore kind fresh buried back at the next station and two of them is pounding leather out of Montana. An honest toll road don't need yore kind, and yuh're through. You got yore choice. Draw yore six or start riding."

The man's face blanched and his eyes shifted to the three stern men behind the Rio Kid. He swallowed and a red stain crept up his neck. He tried to bluff.

"Yuh're buckin' King Baker, friend."

"I intend to," the Rio Kid snapped. His hand lifted slowly toward his holster. "I'm still waiting for yore play."

"I'll—slope out," the man backed off. The Rio Kid waited until the gunhawk had mounted and started to ride away.

"Don't figure King Baker or Idaho Devlin can protect yuh," he called. "If I see yuh again, I start throwing lead."

The Rio Kid then turned to the amazed toll keeper. He gave the man a sweeping glance then strode over to the schedule of tolls posted on the wall. They were high. He turned, eyes hard and cold.

"Yuh got an older toll rate," he stated flatly. "Get it out and post it up here."

"But King ordered that—" the man started and something in the Rio Kid's expression checked him.

"I'm ordering the old schedule back. If Baker or any of his men hollers about it, say the Rio Kid was through here. Get that old schedule up."

The keeper said nothing more but went into the shack, the Rio Kid moving behind him. He pawed through a littered desk and finally brought out a crumpled sheet. The Rio Kid looked at it.

"That's the first schedule we had," the man said.

"Then tack it up. Baker's got a right to run his toll road, but I aim to teach him he ain't got a right to rob people. Yuh can send that word right down the line."

THE man looked uncertain. "Baker will change this again. I got to take his orders."

"Do what yuh have to," the Rio Kid answered. "If Baker makes changes, I'll go after him—not you. Get that tacked up."

When the sheet was up in plain sight outside, the Rio Kid gave a final order. "Soldiers on Government duty ain't to be held up paying toll while a band of killer Indians make their escape. Baker's orders or not, yuh let 'em go right on down the road. I hold yuh responsible for that—personal."

He turned and walked back to Saber, swinging into the saddle. He had opened one toll gate and the ford across the Yellowstone was at least temporarily open to Custer's men. That much of the job had been done, and the Rio Kid felt that the next move would come at Billings.

CHAPTER IX

Murder Charge

FROM the toll gate to Billings the return trip was made without incident, and the four men were glad to see the town again. They had no more than registered and gone to their rooms when General Custer knocked on the Rio Kid's door. The young general's face showed pleasure and excitement.

"You're doing a good job, Pryor. I don't know how many times I've heard stories about the toll gate shoot-out. It's spreading fast."

"Talk's all right but I'd a heap rather hear King Baker's worried," the Rio Kid said wearily.

Custer chuckled. "He is—or he soon will be! Idaho Devlin did a heap of storming around Billings, but his men are getting mighty nervous. They figure Devlin and Baker are losing their grip on the situation and they don't like the way people are beginning to eye them. Rats are the first to leave a sinking ship. Devlin pulled out yesterday, heading west. I think he's gone to talk things over with Baker and ask for help."

"That's something," the Rio Kid said hopefully.

"Brant Grossman and Della have come to Billings," Custer went on. "He's as pleased with your work as I am."

The Rio Kid swung around. "Why did Brant have to come here and bring his daughter? King Baker's sure to show up and this will be a dangerous spot. I figure Billings will see the showdown play between us and Baker."

"Brant's on business of some kind." Custer gave a shrug. "Can you order him out?"

"No," the Rio Kid conceded. "But I don't like it!"

All of them met in the hotel dining room and Brant Grossman was hearty in his approval of the Rio Kid. John Arden instantly paired off with Della and soon was acting as if he hardly realized that any one else was present in the room. The Rio Kid smiled to himself as he watched them and listened to Brant's rumbling voice.

"People are pushing further north all the time," Grossman said. "There's a heap of new towns springing up and that district is going to grow. I figure it's time Bannack & Eastern started freight service up that way. I'm opening a new route from Billings north to the Musselshell River, maybe beyond."

"Building road?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Nope, that's mostly done. But yuh got to have stations, corrals and smithies along a freight line. Yuh need warehouses. I got a construction crew with me and we'll start north in a few days."

"Be ready for trouble," the Rio Kid warned. "Baker don't love any of us, and he'd sure like the chance to strike back."

"I'll watch," Grossman assured him and the conversation changed to other subjects.

For a week there was peace along the toll road and in Billings. The Rio Kid knew that it was false, that King Baker was quietly laying his plans behind the scene. But until the man disclosed his plan of action, the Rio Kid could do little.

However, he could continue his job of clearing this section of the toll road of the killer breed. Once more the four men rode the highway. They found gunhawks at two of the toll barriers where the rates were exorbitant. Once more the silent threat of the Rio Kid's matched Colts sent the renegades on the long trail.

Brant Grossman moved out of Billings at last and John Arden was sorry to see him leave. The young officer had spent much of his free time with Della and the Rio Kid believed that they were coming to a definite understanding. It pleased him. Lieutenant John Arden would go far in the Army, particularly if he had a wife as charming and intelligent as Della Grossman.

The Rio Kid was glad to see the Grossmans leave Billings. They would be far from the town if trouble broke. Three days after they left, the Rio Kid glanced out of the hotel window and stiffened.

"John! Celestino!"

They hurried to his side. The Rio Kid

pointed down to the Montana Toll office. A band of hardcase riders had just come up to the rack and swung out of saddles. Idaho Devlin's powerful, black clad form was instantly discernable. Then out of the crowd, King Baker's slight figure emerged. He disappeared almost instantly into the office.

"It's about to begin," the Rio Kid said quietly. "Looks like Baker has called in a heap of gunslammers to back his play."

"Probably from a dozen or more of his stations," Arden suggested. Celestino shrugged his shoulders.

"*Por dios*, the vacation she's over, eh?"

"Complete," the Rio Kid agreed. "From now on we earn every penny of our expenses. Don't get careless or yuh won't live long."

BAKER remained in the toll office and so did Idaho Devlin. The Rio Kid knew that something of importance was afoot and he kept a sharp eye on all who entered and left the door. Just before sundown, he saw the sheriff come strolling carelessly up the street. The man turned in at the toll office and did not come out again, at least before the Rio Kid broke off his watch for supper.

After the meal, the Rio Kid led the way outside the hotel. The planked sidewalk was a little crowded, for most of the stores were still open. The Rio Kid sauntered along beside John Arden. Celestino had dropped back a few paces to guard his "General's" back against possible bushwhack.

On impulse, the Rio Kid turned in at one of the saloons. The Montana catered to none of the gunhung crew that made the Star their headquarters. Teamsters lined the bar, interspersed with men from the neighboring ranches. An attorney sat at one of the back tables playing a quiet game of solitaire.

The Rio Kid moved to the bar and ordered, Arden and Celestino flanking him. The talk in the room revolved about the big freight wagons, the price of beef, speculations as to the future of the town. It was peaceful talk and the Rio Kid listened, well content. A sudden silence fell on the room and the Rio Kid heard a man say in a loud whisper.

"There's Scar Eggers. Now what does Baker's coyote want in here?"

The Rio Kid didn't turn but fingered his whisky glass. He saw a heavy man appear behind him in the bar mirror. Eggers' face was full and round, the cheeks a trifle flabby. A deep scar cut across one of his jowls adding to the sinister look of his heavy lids that half concealed muddy brown eyes. A nickled star hung from his soiled, black vest. His gunbelt looped over a heavy paunch and hung low on one thick thigh.

He hesitated for a moment behind the Rio Kid and then seemed to make up his mind. He shoved his beefy shoulder between Arden and the Rio Kid with a gruff, growled apology that was almost a curse. The Rio Kid turned mild blue eyes on him.

"Howdy, Sheriff."

"Ugh," Eggers grunted and ordered a drink. He watched Pryor from the corner of his eyes. He downed his drink, half turned. "Yuh'd be Bob Pryor, the gent who's known as the Rio Kid?"

"I reckon."

"Heard yuh been traveling the Yellowstone Road a heap lately. Heard yuh had a shoot-up a week or so ago."

"Yuh heard right," the Rio Kid nodded. Eggers' pursy lips tightened and a menacing purr came into his voice.

"Three men was killed, I heard."

"Three snakes. Did yuh also hear a freighter was shot down in cold blood?"

Eggers disregarded the question. "I've been talking to some gents who saw that fracas, Pryor. I made blasted sure they was telling the truth. It looks like murder to me."

The men around them had pushed away from the bar. Only Eggers, the Rio Kid and his two friends occupied the cleared space. The young Mexican had edged away, turning so he could watch every move in the crowd. His dark eyes cut to the windows and the doors, alert for sign of a bushwhack. He passed a swift signal to Arden that the Rio Kid could take care of himself, to be alert for a sudden attack from the rear.

"Yuh've heard King Baker and Idaho Devlin," the Rio Kid answered easily. "Maybe one of them gunhawks or that rat-faced toll keeper. Maybe yuh'd better listen to my side."

Eggers betrayed his impatience, but checked it. He listened as the Rio Kid outlined what actually had happened. But Pryor knew that Eggers paid little attention, and that the lawman was determined on arrest. He pretended to be fair for the benefit of other persons in the room. At last the Rio Kid finished.

"That ain't like I heard," Eggers growled. "Yuh murdered a man and I reckon I'd better put yuh under arrest. Coming peaceful?"

"Do yuh have a sworn warrant, Sheriff?" the Rio Kid asked coldly. Eggers laughed.

"Don't need one. I've heard the evidence on both sides. Are yuh coming peaceful?"

"I'm not coming at all," the Rio Kid stated flatly. "I can smell skunk in this a mile off. How many prisoners have been killed in yore jail before they came to trial?"

EGGERS flushed and his hand jerked upward. Instantly the Rio Kid fell into a crouch, his jaw set and eyes narrowed. Eggers checked the sudden motion of his hand. The Rio Kid spoke slowly and clearly.

"King Baker owns yuh, Eggers. His renegades packed the election and put yuh in office. Yore arrest is just a crooked play to get me out of the game and in a position where some sneaking son can gun me down. If yuh want to arrest me, without a sworn warrant, make yore play. But be blasted sure yuh're a heap faster with yore six than I am. One of us won't walk away from this bar."

A dead silence settled on the room. Eggers stood framed beneath the hanging lamp, his hulking shoulders looking doubly wide and powerful. He stood tense, uncertain. His muddy eyes shifted quickly to the batwings and back again. He saw no sign of assistance there.

The Rio Kid stood waiting, balanced on the balls of his feet, his elbows crooked, his fingers spreading out close to the matched Colts in the polished holsters. Sweat popped out on Eggers' forehead and slowly the tension left him. His hand dropped to his side.

"I ain't got enough evidence," he said in a choked, muffled voice. "I'll check yore story with what I know." His voice grew stern. "But that's no sign yuh're going scott free. If yuh've lied, I'll be after yuh."

"Fair enough," the Rio Kid answered without moving. "But be sure yuh know the difference between the truth and King Baker's orders."

Eggers turned sharply on his heel and strode through the silent crowd to the door. The moment the batwings slapped behind him, men closed in on the Rio Kid. They approved of him and told him so, loudly. The attorney left his solitaire game, pushed through the crowd.

"Eggers might cause trouble," he said quietly. "It's always easy to arrest a man. I'll be ready to bail you out and fight your case."

"Thanks," the Rio Kid replied. "It's sure white of yuh."

"It will be a pleasure to circumvent King Baker," the grinning lawyer said. "He's been riding too wide and handsome for years. I've always wanted to trim his wings. Don't worry about an arrest."

The Rio Kid waited in the saloon until closing time, but Scar Eggers did not return. It puzzled the Rio Kid that Baker's man had been so easily bluffed. He expected the man to return, maybe with some of Idaho's men at his back, or with the chief gunslinger himself. But there was no sign of the sheriff.

The Rio Kid returned to his hotel, still expecting trouble. But there was no sign of it and the night passed without incident. About an hour after breakfast, General Custer came to his room and Brant Grossman was with him. Grossman looked worried and angry and the Rio Kid thought instantly of his daughter.

"Yuh've had trouble," he stated flatly. Grossman cursed fervently and slammed his hat down on the bed.

"Plenty of it! Some bushwhacking sons hit my construction crew last night. Killed two of 'em, and scattered the rest. They set fire to a new station we had just built and the whole thing went up in smoke."

"Della?" the Rio Kid snapped.

"She wasn't harmed none. Lucky we both was staying at a ranch that night—

friend of mine. If we hadn't, we'd been right in the middle of it."

"Brant also had a visitor," Custer said quietly. Brant cursed again.

"I rode into Billings to hire new men and get new material. I reckon they figured I'd do that. A gent came last night and had a long talk with me."

"King Baker?" the Rio Kid asked sharply. Grossman smiled crookedly and shook his head.

"Yuh don't think he'd tip his hand direct, do yuh? He don't want me to open this new road since he won't have control of it. It was his gunslammers that hit my crew—but prove it. No, one of his crooked politicians talked to me. He warned me to forget the new line to the Musselshell and hinted that maybe some mighty unpleasant things would happen up that way. He figured that the legislature wouldn't like a new freight line going up there, and maybe the franchise on my whole line would be revoked. Anyhow, I wouldn't have enough business to keep going."

THE Rio Kid moved to the window and frowned down on the street. The silent front of the Montana Toll Company seemed to mock him. Brant stirred slightly on the bed.

"I could use yuh up there, Pryor. I don't aim to knuckle under to King Baker, but I'll sure need protection."

"Protection is needed in a lot of places," the Rio Kid said thoughtfully. "And perhaps King Baker needs it as much as us."

"What do you mean by that?" Brant asked, getting to his feet.

"We're causing King Baker trouble, just like he is starting to cause trouble, and so it looks as if one of us aims to stop the other as quick as possible."

"I don't get it," Grossman admitted.

Custer lighted a cigar. "I think I can figure it out," he said, smiling. "Pryor doesn't forget his military experiences."

"Let's have it plain," Grossman said. "Don't speak in riddles, Pryor."

The Rio Kid was silent for several minutes before he answered Grossman. He turned from the window, saw that Custer narrowly watched him.

"Our main job is to break King Baker and his toll road. We've caused him so much trouble that he's come to Billings and a showdown ain't far off. If I go to the Musselshell with yuh, Brant, then King Baker will have time to patch up the damage we've done to him down here, and our work will all have to be done over again. King Baker would be smart enougth to try to draw me off by hitting at you."

Custer smiled slightly but said nothing and the Rio Kid knew that he had chosen right. Brant frowned down at the faded carpet, tugged at his lower lip. He sighed and looked up.

"Yuh're right. I'll fight this alone until yuh've hit him down here. I could stop my construction but there's enough of stubborn mule in me that I don't aim to."

The Rio Kid grinned. "No need for it. Baker will just make jabs at you. He'll keep most of his gunslammers close to Billings. But yuh'd make me feel a heap better if yuh sent Della back to Bozeman or Virginia City. John Arden would sure appreciate that, too."

Brant arose. "Yuh're right, but Della and me has always been partners and we always traveled together. She won't like it, but I'll send her back to the main office."

Not long after Brant Grossman had left, the Rio Kid heard excitement mount in the street. He saw men streaming toward the far end of the street. There were shouted inquiries.

"Killing!" the Rio Kid heard in answer. "Murder!"

He swung from the window and, with a word to Celestino, hurried to the street. He turned in the direction the crowd streamed. At the end of the street stood an abandoned house, the windows looking sightlessly out on the world. The crowd stood around the sagging doorway, peering inside.

The Rio Kid pushed his way through the bunched and silent men and looked inside. A doctor knelt on the littered floor beside a still form. Just beyond the doctor stood King Baker. He looked up as the Rio Kid entered, eyes cold as death itself. Beside him, Idaho Devlin stirred as Baker made a swift, checking gesture with his hand.

"We have murder here, Pryor," Baker said.

CHAPTER X

Counter-Attack

QUIETLY THE Rio Kid moved around the doctor and looked down. Eggers' slack face had a marble hue and the glassy eyes stared upward, unseeing. The front of his shirt was a mass of blood and the doctor had stripped it off, revealing the deep knife wound over the heart. The Rio Kid's lips thinned. Now he knew why Eggers had not returned.

"It happened some time last night," Baker said. "The last we saw of Eggers he was headed for yore hotel, Pryor. Maybe you can tell us what happened."

"Implying I did this job?" the Rio Kid demanded.

"No. Knife work's not your line, Pryor. I know that. Matched Colts do your killing. But you were the last to see him."

The men in the doorway and the doctor beside Eggers eyed the Rio Kid. He shrugged.

"I'll tell what I know—and it's not much—to the lawman who takes Eggers place," Pryor said. "You taking over the job, Baker?"

"Not me!" Baker laughed mirthlessly and his eyes narrowed. "Just thought you might want to clear yourself here and now. I reckon the new lawman, whoever he is, will handle things."

Baker spoke a quiet word to Devlin and moved to the door. The crowd parted, letting him through. Idaho gave the Rio Kid a swift look, filled with hatred, and swaggered out after his boss. The Rio Kid looked down at the body on the floor. He had no doubt who had killed Eggers. The lawman had been no more than a pawn in King Baker's devious game.

"Nothing we can do here," the Rio Kid said to Celestino and he walked to the door.

Once again the crowd parted. King Baker had done a good job of planting suspicion. The Rio Kid caught several sidelong, weighing glances as he passed through the crowd and several of the men scowled at Celestino.

They reached the street and turned back to the hotel. The Rio Kid thought of Jim Bridger and he went on to the old trapper's cabin at the far end of town. Bridger sat at ease on a bench in the warm sunshine. He grunted and moved over, making room for the Rio Kid and Celestino.

"Injun work last night," he said abruptly. "Scar Eggers got his'n."

"I know," the Rio Kid nodded. "Any idea who did it?"

"Nope."

"Might pay us to find out, Jim. Baker's behind it, but I want to know the gent who actually used the knife."

"I'll trail the skunk down."

"Don't tip yore hand," the Rio Kid warned. "We might spring a surprise on Baker."

[*Turn page*]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

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Later in the day, Brant Grossman and a new construction crew rode out of Billings. Each man was heavily armed and Brant paraded them boldly down the main street, a strong hint to the renegades that their next raid would not be so easy.

Talk of Eggers murder filled the town and men speculated as to who might have done the deed, and who would wear the law badge. Two or three times the Rio Kid noticed how swiftly little groups would break off talking as he and Celestino approached. At last they returned to the hotel and found Jim Bridger waiting for them in their room.

"Ain't picked up no trail yet," the old scout reported, "but I been listening to the wind. Billings has got a new lawman, but it ain't been made public yet."

"Who?"

"Idaho Devlin," Bridger spat in disgust. "Seems as though some of the town officials owe King Baker a heap of favors. So Devlin got the badge."

"Baker's second move," the Rio Kid said thoughtfully. "Now Idaho's killer guns are protected by a law badge. I can begin to see how things are shaping up."

"Ain't purty," Bridger arose. "Yuh'd better draw in yore horns and keep yore sixes oiled."

"We'd better find Eggers' killer," the Rio Kid snapped. "Baker will make something of that. Celestino, yuh'd better help Jim. The two of yuh can cover the town quicker."

CELESTINO left with Bridger and the Rio Kid went to Custer's room. The General had nothing new to report, except that Brant Grossman had definitely promised to get Della out of danger. The talk of the two soldiers gradually drifted to the Army and reminiscences of the Civil War.

Before the Rio Kid realized it, several hours had passed. A quick, impatient knock at the door broke through the cloud of memories both men had invoked. Custer sighed and opened to John Arden.

"There's bad trouble!" the young officer blurted. The Rio Kid instantly came to his feet.

"Idaho Devlin is the new lawman." Arden rushed on, "and he's made an arrest for the knifing of Eggers."

"Who, man!" Custer exclaimed impatiently.

"It's Celestino. I heard talk of it downstairs. I guess he put up a fight and they beat him up considerable. He's in jail right now."

The Rio Kid's lips thinned and his jaw jutted forward. His eyes became cold.

"So that's Baker's plan. I'm getting Celestino out, General."

Custer swore. "I wish I could help you but I got to stay low. Lieutenant, I'd like to change places with you for an hour or so."

Suddenly Jim Bridger appeared silently in the doorway. The old man glanced keenly around the room.

"Yuh've heered. They slugged him with their guns. There was Devlin and four of his pistol totin' deputies."

"We're getting him out," the Rio Kid snapped.

"Wagh! That's pure good news. I'll help yuh."

The three men left the hotel. The moment they stepped out on the street, the Rio Kid realized that it was strangely deserted. He sensed that he and his companions were watched from all the nearby buildings and stores. He loosened the Colts in their holsters and turned toward the jail.

The jail itself was a heavy log affair, just behind and to one side of the sheriff's office. It sat back in a narrow culde-sac between the office and a two-storied grocery and lodge building. As he moved along, the Rio Kid sensed the tension mount and his quick eyes moved from point to point, seeking signs of a trap. There were none, apparently, but the Rio Kid did not relax.

He turned in to the sheriff's office and walked boldly up to the door. He pushed it open and stepped into an empty room. Arden and Bridger waited outside, alert and ready for trouble.

There was no sign of Idaho Devlin's presence nor of any of his men. The very silence was oppressive. The Rio Kid looked around the room and saw a huge ring of keys hanging on a wall peg. His eyes lit and in two swift strides he was across the room and had the keys. He started toward the door. checked.

and looked down at the heavy ring. This was proving to be too easy. He stopped just inside the door and spoke to Arden and Bridger.

"Look around careful. See if there's anyone waiting for us to make a move?" There was a long silence, and at last Arden spoke.

"I can't spot anyone. But there's plenty of windows across the street and in the grocery. What's wrong?"

"Idaho was so blasted thoughtful he left the jail keys on the wall in here. He ain't nowhere in sight."

"They've set a trap!" Arden said. "Yuh're walking into it?"

"If we don't, they'll railroad Celestino in a hangnoose, or Baker will make up a lynch party. They'll start the play when I step out or when I start to unlock the jail door. You and Jim stay back by the street when I go to the jail. That'll scatter us out and yuh can watch my back. You ready?"

"Ready!" Arden snapped.

"Float yore stick," Jim Bridger drawled.

"I'll give yuh time to move out to the street."

The Rio Kid waited for a couple of minutes. He slipped the big key ring up over his shoulder, leaving both his hands free. His jaw set and he stepped outside.

He paused, expecting to hear the blast of guns. But none came. Arden and Bridger stood by the planked sidewalk, shooting swift glances in all directions. Once again the Rio Kid noticed how deserted the town was.

HE MOVED away from the door and around the corner of the office. Twenty feet away the solid planked door of the jail stood a silent threat. The Rio Kid walked ahead with a steady stride. A few yards from the door, he lifted the key ring from his shoulder. A slight sound made him jerk his eyes upward.

He caught the glint of sun on metal above him and to his right. Instantly the Rio Kid faded to one side and the key ring dropped into the dust. His Colts blurred out of the holsters, pointed upward and spat flame.

There was an answering roar from above but the slug went wild. The renegade who had hidden on the roof jerked erect, whirled half around and came plummeting down over the eaves. Instantly guns blasted, seemingly from all directions. The Rio Kid dimly heard the roar of Bridger's rifle.

His own slugs smashed through the windows of the sheriff's office, changing a leering face into a mask of blood that dropped instantly from sight. Bullets whined close around him. His hat sailed from his head, something tugged viciously at his sleeve.

He was in the open and exposed, while Devlin had placed his killers behind the protection of the buildings. To remain would be suicide, and the Rio Kid realized it. He whirled and, in a zig-zag, erratic course, fought his way back toward the street. Arden's guns covered the buildings across the street and kept the renegade fire there to a minimum.

The Rio Kid's own swift Colts blasted flame and death at whoever showed his head. Still guns fired from every window. Only the Rio Kid's swift pace saved him, his sudden change of directions. It hurried the renegade fire.

He reached Arden and Bridger and the three moved away from the jail. Men poured out of the store across the street, firing as they came. The Rio Kid's guns drove them back into a swift retreat. The firing slackened, fell off altogether.

The Rio Kid reached the hotel and he stared gloomily down the street. Only sheer luck and his own courage and accurate fire had foiled the deadly gun trap that Idaho had set. For the moment King Baker held trumps, the Rio Kid acknowledged, and there were several moves the slippery toll road operator could move.

"We'll have to leave Celestino in jail for awhile," he said grimly to his friends. "But if Baker thinks we're licked, he'd better shuffle and cut again."

Next Issue's Novel: GOLDEN EMPIRE, by DEAN OWEN

CHAPTER XI

Arraignment

BILLINGS seemed doubly quiet after the gun fire broke off. The Rio Kid went to his room, reloaded and checked his guns. Only then did he give any attention to the bullet burn across his arm. John Arden sank cursing down in a chair while Bridger scowled out the window.

"What'll Baker do next?" Arden demanded. At that moment Custer came storming in, throwing swift questions about the gunfight. He listened nervously as the Rio Kid outlined what had happened.

"It was a neat trap, and Baker had you figured for just such a move," Custer swore. "What'll he pull next?"

"John just asked that. Might be Idaho and his deputies may come with a warrant for our arrest, figuring on a showdown. Might be they'll let things ride and hold Celestino for a mock trial that'll put a hangnoose on him. But they'll guard that jail, yuh can depend on it."

"You can't let Mireles hang!" Arden exclaimed. The Rio Kid smiled frostily.

"I don't intend to. I'll gun down every crooked lawman and judge in Montana if they try to hang him. But I don't figure Baker will work that way. He's got Celestino and he'll use him. He tried to kill me. That failed. Baker will have an alternate plan all staked out and corralled."

Within an hour the Rio Kid's prediction came true. Arden opened the door, drawn six in his hand, in answer to a bold knock. A bearded, slack-lipped man stood in the hall, hands raised. He wore no gunbelt, but he grinned in evil mockery at the Rio Kid.

"I got a message for yuh."

"Start talking," the Rio Kid snapped.

"King Baker would like to see yuh. He'll be over at the Toll Company office for an hour."

"Another gun trap?" the Rio Kid demanded.

"King says that yuh won't be bothered none, at least until after he's talked with yuh."

The man made a mock salute, wheeled and walked away. John Arden closed the door and looked questioningly at the Rio Kid.

"Baker wants to bargain. I'd better see him."

"You don't bargain with a snake," Arden protested.

"Yuh don't," the Rio Kid agreed. "But yuh get some idea of what he intends to do. Bridger, yuh'd better keep on hunting for Eggers' killer while I'm having this parley. We've got to find that gent."

The Rio Kid checked his guns and placed his hat on his head. He left the hotel and walked across the street, hands swinging close to his holsters. Baker had promised a truce, but the Rio Kid didn't fully trust the man's word. He was expected at the office. A clerk led him to a private office without a word, knocked on the door and entered.

King Baker sat at a desk and Idaho Devlin lounged in a chair near the window. Light glinted from the nickled star on the renegade's shirt. He grinned at the Rio Kid as a man would to an enemy already defeated. Baker waved the Rio Kid to a chair.

"It's time we had a talk, Pryor. You've caused me a good deal of trouble but I think that time is over. Fortunately for me, Mireles did a neat little job of murder."

"That's a lie," the Rio Kid retorted. Baker smiled and Idaho Devlin chuckled aloud.

"He's in jail on that charge, nevertheless. He resisted arrest and the boys had considerable pleasure mauling him around a little. Unless you come to terms, they'll have the greater pleasure of stringing him up."

"Yuh can prove nothing at a trial," the Rio Kid challenged.

"Now let's see," Baker said softly. "Eggers came to arrest you for the killing of one of my men. He never made the arrest and disappeared. That is easily proved. He was knifed, a distinctly Mexican method of getting rid of unwanted people. The Mexican might have

JIM BRIDGER

JIM BRIDGER was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1804. At the age of eight, his family moved to St. Louis and Jim spent his boyhood in that Frontier city, serving as a blacksmith's apprentice and ferry boat operator.

In 1822 he joined with the first expedition of the Ashley-Henry Company in search of furs along the upper reaches of the Missouri and Yellowstone. This was the start of a distinguished career as fur trader, Indian fighter, guide and scout to the Army.

Bridger could neither read nor write and so left a scanty record. As a consequence many of his accomplishments went unrewarded and unrecognized until comparatively recent years. He discovered the South Pass over the Rocky Mountains. He helped establish the Overland and Oregon Trails and acted as guide to many exploration parties sent out by the United States Army.

In 1843 he quit the fur trade and established a post of his own near the Utah line. He was the first to tell Brigham Young of the Great Salt Lake. Bridger fought long and well against the savage tribes of the plains and was chosen by General Dodge to be chief scout for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Bridger died at St. Louis in 1881. His life span had covered the great westward movement of our nation, through the era of the lonely fur trapper and the first scattered settlements, to the building of the railroads and the establishment of the great cattle industry of the West.

been seen near that old abandoned building. I imagine I could find a witness if I looked hard enough."

"Circumstantial," the Rio Kid snapped.

"Maybe. Let's be honest with one another, Pryor, since there's no one else around to hear. I am assured that the judge in the case will decide against your friend. The judge is in my debt. I can be sure that the jury will bring a verdict of guilty, since few people in Billings dare to buck me. I can produce witnesses by the score to cover every point the defense might bring up. Mireles will hang—unless you prevent it."

"How?"

BAKER'S face was cruel as he gave his ultimatum.

"You will leave Billings, you and your friends. A couple of Idaho's friends will ride with you. They'll send word when you've crossed the Montana line. I will then see that Mireles 'escapes' from jail. He'll reach you safe and sound. Of course, he can never return to Montana because of the murder charge. Mireles will bring you the original five thousand dollars I offered. I'm generous and

you've been to some expense."

"Kind of yuh," the Rio Kid said shortly. "Do I have to give my answer now?"

"No, Pryor. Mireles will stay safely in jail. His arraignment will come up tomorrow. He will be charged with murder. You have a full day after the arraignment to give me an answer. If you agree to my terms, everything will be fine. If you don't, I'll have your friend tried and hanged in three days. You can depend on that."

"Yuh make it blasted clear."

"I intend to. There is another little item I must mention. If you should decide to stay and try to fight me, the new lawman will have a warrant for your arrest on attempted jail-break. He'll have enough guns backing him, so that you'll either be in the cell beside Mireles or in Boot Hill. I have every angle covered. Think it over. Good day, Mr. Pryor."

King arose and bowed. The Rio Kid disregarded his mockery and Idaho's triumphant grin. He wheeled to the door and walked out. Baker had made everything very clear and the Rio Kid couldn't see any way out of the trap. He could not stand by and see Mireles harmed. As Celestino had dedicated his life to the Rio Kid, so Bob Pryor felt he owed his to the young Mexican.

Custer waited at the hotel with a letter from Governor Ashley. The Rio Kid sank down on the bed and briefly outlined the proposition Baker had made. Custer listened, his frown growing deeper.

"You can't give up the fight here, Captain."

"I can't let Celestino die, either. Would you?"

Custer swore. He pulled the letter from his tunic and opened it. "Ashley is pleased with what has been done already. Here, read this section."

The Rio Kid rapidly scanned the clear flowing script of the Governor. The letter read:

I am making good progress here in Bannack and I believe the power of such men as Baker will soon be a thing of the past. The news from Billings and other points where the Rio Kid has been has caused the public to realize what an absolute pirate Baker is, and has called angry attention to his rule by the six-gun, his extortion in tolls, his rotten ring of corrupt legislators here in the capital.

A bill to repeal the franchises on toll roads has been introduced. If the public attention and anger can remain focussed on Baker, this bill will pass. It is regrettable that the greed and evil of such men as Baker reflects on the honest toll companies. But I believe that they will receive new franchises more tightly worded to protect the public. Tell Pryor to keep up the good work and the job is done.

The Rio Kid folded the letter and handed it back to the General.

"I'll hold off any decision until I see how Celestino is treated at the arraignment," he said. "I have time for that."

The court proceedings were held the next day. The Rio Kid sat at a witness bench just inside the rail. The place was crowded and everywhere the Rio Kid saw Devlin's gunslammers. King Baker himself sat at a far table and bowed slightly to the Rio Kid. Custer was not present, but Arden and Bridger sat back in the crowd.

Celestino was brought in and the Rio Kid had to choke down a boiling anger. The young Mexican's face was badly bruised and one eye was puffed almost shut. His jacket was ripped and he presented a sorry picture. But he had a swift smile and nod for the Rio Kid, an eloquent shrug of the shoulders.

The presiding judge was a thin rail of a man with a hatchet face who watched King Baker's reactions more than he did the witnesses or the legal points brought up.

The Rio Kid swiftly understood why it was that Celestino faced a murder charge. Gunhawk after gunhawk swore on oath that Eggers had gone to arrest the Rio Kid, that he had not been seen afterward. Others swore that the young Mexican had been seen near the deserted house. The Rio Kid's testimony had little bearing on the case.

WITHIN ten minutes after the last argument a decision was reached. Celestino Mireles was to be bound over to the sheriff, to stand trial for his life, accused of the murder of Scar Eggers. Mireles was led off to jail. Baker worked his way through the crowd to the Rio Kid's side.

"You see how things will go," he said softly. "You have until tomorrow night to make your decision, Pryor."

Two hours after the farcical arraign-

ment, the Rio Kid learned that the young man's trial was set for the third day. John Arden brought that news while Custer and the Rio Kid discussed the situation. The Rio Kid threw his hands wide.

"Baker's making his threat stick, General. He's making sure I leave Billings by tomorrow night."

Custer paced up and down. Suddenly he turned, eyes alight. "The judge belongs to Baker, you say, and the prosecutor railroaded the whole deal through this morning. He didn't cross-examine those gunhawks too much and the judge wouldn't let Mireles' attorney question them very hard."

"It'll be that way at the trial."

"Maybe." Custer wheeled to Arden. "Get to the telegraph office. Send a wire to Ashley that the local judge and prosecutor are prejudiced and unfair. Ask him to appoint special officers for this trial. Tell him you'll wait for an answer. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Arden snapped and hurried from the room. He had been gone less than five minutes when Jim Bridger came silently up the hall and opened the door. He leaned on his long rifle.

"I done got yore killer tagged."

The Rio Kid jumped up as though he had touched a hot wire. The old mountain man's eyes lighted.

"There's a breed named Pedro Doma. Got a scar that pulls his mouth clean to one side. Allus busted, I heard, and then he has a heap of money all of a sudden. Been getting likkered up and talkin' what good friends him and King Baker is. I reckon if yuh don't get him soon, Baker will—with a bullet."

"Where'll I find him?"

"He's got a shack at the west end of town. I'd have got him but I figgered yuh'd want the pleasure."

The Rio Kid nodded grimly. He started toward the door, then checked, glancing at the afternoon sun that streamed in the windows. He shook his head and turned to General Custer.

"If one of Baker's gunmen spots me heading toward Doma's place, they'll know what has happened. I'll get him after dark. I might want to hide him, General. Could I use Fort Smith?"

"You can," Custer agreed.

CHAPTER XII

Showdown

PATIENTLY THE Rio Kid prepared to wait out the dragging hours until dark. Just before sundown, Arden returned from the telegraph station and gave Custer a wire. The General read it hastily and smiled.

"Ashley is sending orders to the judge and prosecutor to step down from this murder case. He's appointed the mayor as acting judge and sending his own lawyer to act as prosecutor. Mireles will have a fair trial."

The Rio Kid ate a sketchy supper, but by that time full night had come. He refused John Arden's help and prowled toward the western end of town. Following Bridger's directions, he came to a ramshackle building. He heard a cracked voice singing a Spanish song of questionable wording. The Rio Kid moved silently toward the doorway, through which lamplight streamed.

He reached it and peered inside. A slender man lolled at a table, straightened and poured himself a drink from a bottle nearly full. As he moved, the Rio Kid saw the ugly scar that seemed to pull the man's mouth over to the left. Black hair strung in unruly ringlets over a low forehead. Black eyes held an evil glitter as the man lifted the glass to the lamplight and his smile was a horrible grimace. He wore a heavy gunbelt, the holster tied down.

The Rio Kid stepped noiselessly into the room, just behind the man.

"Pedro Doma," he said quietly.

The man whirled around, the glass dropping. His black eyes centered on the Rio Kid and his hand, that had dropped to his side, jerked away from his gun. He smiled again.

"Si, senor?" he asked in an innocent voice.

"Yuh're going with me," the Rio Kid said. "Yuh're going to tell the court who killed Scar Eggers and why. Yuh're

going to say who paid over the dinero for the murder."

Doma's eyes narrowed. He shrugged. "I know nozzing, *senor*. You have heem the wrong hombre."

"No. Yuh've been watched and yuh talk too much." The Rio Kid's hand blurred and a heavy Colt lined on the breed. "Unbuckle that gunbelt and drop it. Then walk mighty quiet ahead of me out the door. Any false move and yuh'll regret it."

Doma flinched as the gun lined on him. He protested his innocence in voluble broken English but the Rio Kid was adamant. At last, Doma shrugged and very carefully unbuckled his belt. The gun and holster thudded to the floor and Doma moved slowly away from the chair. He reached the door, the Rio Kid close beside him.

Without warning, Doma whirled with the speed of a striking snake. His left hand knocked aside the Rio Kid's gun. His right had streaked up to his shirt collar and now a knife gleamed in his dark fist. It slashed downward in a swift thrust.

The Rio Kid caught the man's wrist as the point came within an inch of his chest. Doma had a firm grip now on the Rio Kid's gun wrist and the two men strained together in a deadly silent fight.

Despite Doma's slight build, the Rio Kid discovered the breed had muscles as tough as steel. With a quick twist and jerk, the man had his knife arm free again. Instantly the blade came up in an underhand cut. The Rio Kid twisted to one side and the weapon cut a gash across his leg upward to the hip.

The Rio Kid threw himself back, pivoting on his heel. Once more the knife cut at him but the Rio Kid blocked the blow. The edge of his open palm slapped against Pedro's throat, just at the Adam's apple. The breed choked and collapsed, the knife dropping from his hand. He fell to the floor, gasping for breath, his face darkening and suffused. The Rio Kid picked up the knife and put it in his pocket.

Doma seemed to be recovering. The Rio Kid stepped close and at last the breed sat up, still gasping but with his wits about him. The Rio Kid used his boot toe to prod the man to his feet.

"Yuh won't live to pull another trick," the Rio Kid said coldly. His gun muzzle buried into the breed's side. "Head out."

The Rio Kid brought the breed to Jim Bridger's cabin, where Custer waited impatiently with John Arden. Pedro Doma now looked frightened and sober but he denied any connection with Scar Eggers' murder. He sweated under the inquisition but still maintained his innocence.

"Wagh!" Bridger said in disgust. "Let me handle the snake. I know some mighty unpleasant ways the Blackfoot used to make a man talk."

THE RIO KID saw the swift look of fear that passed over Doma's swart face. Bob Pryor winked secretively at Custer and moved toward the door.

"Too blamed bad he won't save hisself," the Rio Kid sighed. "Don't burn off all his toes, Jim. I figure he'll talk before then."

He touched the door. "No, Senor!" Pedro suddenly yelled. "No! Don't leave me! I have heard of thees Blackfoot! *Madre de Dios!* He will keel me!"

"You can always tell what yuh know," the Rio Kid said coldly. Pedro swallowed and looked uncertain. Then he saw Bridger calmly building up a fire and the last of the false courage left Doma. In swift, tumbling words he told of the death of Scar Eggers, the money King Baker had given him for the job. The Rio Kid listened quietly, though his impulse was to wring the murderer's neck.

"Yuh'll tell this to the court," he said. "If yuh tell the whole truth about Baker, yuh might not hang. That depends on the jury. But if yuh lie yuh won't have a chance."

"I tell the truth, Senor!" The Rio Kid turned to the old trapper.

"Jim, can yore friend keep this snake hid here? Celestino's safe from a hang-noose, but I want to spring Doma as a surprise. King Baker will find himself in the trap he set for Celestino."

"The skunk will keep safe and sound right here," Bridger assured his friend.

The Rio Kid saw the grim way in which the old trapper stroked his sheathed knife and looked squarely at the breed. Doma shivered again and in-

voluntarily drew back. The Rio Kid was satisfied. He left the hut with Custer and Arden, bone weary and eager for sleep.

The next morning Brant Grossman and Della came to Billings and the Rio Kid took quiet pleasure in the way her eyes lighted when she saw John Arden. Grossman was filled with news about his progress along the Musselshell in establishing the new freight line.

"I'm sending Della back to Virginia City, but I figure she won't be there long. Baker can't hope to stay top dog. Custer showed me Ashley's letter and it looks like we're just about to win the hand."

"Just about!" The Rio Kid sighed in relief. "I've got the winning trick up my sleeve right now. When Celestino comes to trial under an honest judge, Baker and Devlin face a hangnoose or a long time in jail—I don't care which."

Custer hurried into the room. He was tense and excited. "Baker has disregarded the Governor's orders. He's had Mireles' trial set up under his own crooked judge. It starts right now. I figure they plan to railroad the whole thing."

The Rio Kid came to his feet. "But the order Ashley sent!"

"They're disregarding it. They slipped Celestino over to the courthouse an hour ago. It's a mock trial, Pryor, with a bunch of perjured witnesses. They'll find him guilty and hang him before you can move. That's Baker's plan."

The Rio Kid swung out the door, calling for Arden. He sent the young officer hurrying to Bridger's place with orders to bring the breed to the court if he had to fight through gunhawks every step of the way.

Brant Grossman hurried up to the Rio Kid. He had buckled on a gunbelt and he looked grim and determined.

"I'll side yuh, Pryor," he said. "They may try to keep yuh away from the trial."

"Baker figures that telegram to the Governor was my answer to his offer." The Rio Kid touched his Colts. "I got a gunsmoke answer for the gent's latest move."

There were only a few men around the courthouse and the place seemed almost void of life. One of the men stared at the Rio Kid, wheeled and started for the door. Instantly, the Rio Kid's Colt lined on him.

"I don't need an announcer," he snapped. A note of grim mockery crept in his voice. "I aim to surprise yore friends."

The man shrank back from the threat of the gun and the others made no move to side him. The Rio Kid edged into the main hallway, holstered his six, and headed for the stairs. Brant, alert and tense, came behind him. The hall above was deserted but the Rio Kid heard the murmur of voices from an open door.

HE ENTERED. His eyes swiftly circled the room. Celestino sat at a long table alone, his attorney was before the hatchet-faced judge. At another table sat King Baker and Idaho Devlin. Twelve jurymen filled the box and it took only a single glance to show the Rio Kid they were all Baker's men.

[*Turn page*]

196 PAGES OF SIX-GUN THRILLS

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The first row or two of spectator's seats were filled with more of the gunhawk breed.

"—highly irregular and illegal," Celestino's attorney argued. "You have no power to sit on this case. I have been constantly hampered in my cross-examination of the prosecution's witnesses, nor have you allowed me time to prepare a proper case."

"It pleases the court," the judge intoned with a quick side glance at Baker, "to bring this case to trial. In the opinion of the court the jury was properly selected, the witnesses properly questioned. Any further questioning on your part will result in contempt charges."

"But, you have no right to sit in the case."

"I have every right!"

"But Governor Ashley removed you by telegraphed order! He also invalidated the present prosecutor as being prejudiced. I have a copy of it."

"You may have a copy," the judge smiled. "I received no such wire and cannot admit your allegations. The trial will proceed, unless you wish to spend some days in jail in contempt of court."

"I will not—" the attorney stormed, but the Rio Kid's cold voice cut him short.

"We'll play the game with the cards they've dealt. Yuh got more witnesses coming, and one will be a mighty mean surprise."

Idaho Devlin whirled and his gun streaked out. The Rio Kid made no move to match the renegade's draw. He looked at the stunned judge and then to Baker, whose eyes were narrowed to glittering slits.

"Yuh'll have a heap of explaining, yore Honor, if there's gunplay in here. Yuh've tried to sneak this trial through with a packed jury and a cold deck. Yuh might have got away with that, but yuh'd never get away with gunsmoke."

"Put up that six, you fool!" King Baker snapped. The judge swallowed and rapped with his gavel. Idaho reluctantly sheathed his Colt.

The Rio Kid moved through the barrier and gave Celestino an encouraging smile. The attorney stared at the Rio Kid, caught a slight signal and turned back to the judge.

"I withdraw my objections. If the court will allow me a few minutes for consultation, the defense will be ready with its case."

"Granted," the judge snapped. "You have ten minutes."

The lawyer hurried to the table and sank down beside Celestino. The Rio Kid bent low over the two men, speaking swiftly.

"This case will bust wide open even with a packed court if yuh stall for time. Put Celestino on the stand, drag out the questioning. Then put Brant Grossman on, then me. Watch for my signal and then call for Pedro Doma."

"But who is he? How can he help?"

"He's the gent who knifed Scar Eggers. He was paid by King Baker and took his orders from Idaho Devlin. Be ready for trouble and plenty of it. Now get Celestino up there on the witness stand."

CHAPTER XIII

A Plot Fails

MOMENTARILY the attorney's mouth dropped open in surprise. Then his face lighted and his lips snapped shut. King Baker, Idaho and the prosecutor had their heads together in a hurried consultation but they snapped erect when the defense lawyer approached the bench.

"I'm ready, your Honor. I call on Celestino Mireles."

The young Mexican took his place and repeated the oath. He sat down, bruised face confident, watching "his General" for cues and encouragement. His attorney started bringing out Celestino's story and the prosecutor tried to block each statement with objections. The judge supported most of them.

People suddenly started coming into the courtroom and these were not of the gunhawk breed. They were the solid citizens of the town, many of them Brant's teamsters. Several wore the

blue uniform of the Army, men on leave from distant Fort Smith. Baker, Devlin and the gunhawks became uneasy and restless but there was nothing they could do. Suddenly Della Grossman appeared in the doorway and, just behind her, General Custer.

A low murmur swept the courtroom. The gunhawks looked swiftly toward Idaho and Baker, but those two men were plainly worried. The hatchet-faced judge reflected their uncertainty and, at a whispered word from Baker, the prosecutor brought up fewer objections. The Rio Kid kept watching the door.

John Arden appeared and instantly the Rio Kid passed a signal to the attorney. The man instantly turned Celestino over to the prosecutor for cross-examination and hurried to the table. The prosecutor savagely tore into Celestino, trying to twist his story but he didn't succeed.

With Baker's packed jury, there was not much need to work too hard on the defendant. The man's doom was practically sealed before the trial began. At last the prosecutor dismissed Celestino and the judge looked toward the defense table. The attorney arose.

"We have elected to fight this case in the face of what we believe to be a packed jury, a judge and a prosecutor already declared by the Governor to be incompetent in this trial. We stand by that decision and call on the citizens of Billings present in the court room to be witnesses to it. We have a surprise witness."

"You may call your witness," the judge said uncertainly. The Rio Kid noticed that sweat stood out on the man's forehead and he constantly looked at King Baker. This quick, railroaded trial had gone amiss and out of hand, and the judge realized his danger. The attorney smiled and the Rio Kid pushed away slightly from the table, his keen eyes watching every move Idaho Devlin and King Baker made.

"Our new witness will definitely establish who killed Scar Eggers and why," the defense attorney went on. "He is the man who, by his own confession, knifed Scar Eggers to death. He was paid for the job by King Baker and took direct orders from Idaho Devlin. I call Pedro Doma to the stand."

Jim Bridger appeared in the rear doorway, Pedro Doma shuffling just ahead of him. For a long moment, absolute silence held the stunned court. Idaho and King Baker stared at the breed, frozen in their chairs. The Rio Kid saw Baker's eyes narrow and the man's evil brain raced to figure some way out of this tight spot. But Idaho took more direct means.

Devlin saw only that the whole scheme had been exposed and that his own neck was in danger of a hangnoose. He came to his feet and his gun streaked out of the holster. Instantly the Rio Kid slid out of the chair in a fighting crouch and his hands dropped down to his holster. The gunhawks followed Devlin's lead, fearing their own implication in the murder.

Idaho caught the Rio Kid's move and he half turned, his gun streaking fire. The bullet fanned close to the Rio Kid's cheek. Idaho fired hastily and he moved back around the table. A roar went up from the crowd behind the gunhawks and they surged forward to the barrier. The Rio Kid carefully held his fire until Idaho was clear. The gunhawk took another hasty shot at the Rio Kid and then Pryor's blue Colt thundered.

By now pandemonium reigned in the little room. The judge had disappeared beneath his bench and scurried for a side door. Guns blasted as the renegades fired into the crowd, desperate to escape. Answering guns blasted in their faces and powder smoke became thick and blinding. A man screamed and crashed over the wooden barrier. The heavy tables were overturned.

IDAHO caught the Rio Kid's slug directly in his chest. He was driven back against the judge's bench, hung there for a ghastly second as though plastered against it. Then he sank down to the floor, his gun spilling from his loose fingers.

King Baker had retreated to the far wall and, crouching, slid along it toward one of the exits. The Rio Kid had lost sight of him in the turmoil and now he turned, narrowed eyes s e a r c h i n g through the smoke filled room. A door crashed as the fleeing renegades struck

it and they streaked out into a rear corridor, seeking to make good their escape.

The Rio Kid fought his way through the crowd, determined that King Baker should not get away. He caught a glimpse of the man against the far wall, a deadly Derringer in his hand. Then shoving bodies cut between the Rio Kid and his quarry. A renegade hurtled into him and the Rio Kid's gun barrel rose and fell in a sharp blow. The gunslammer collapsed.

At last the Rio Kid fought free of the melee. King Baker had just a few feet to go to the door. The Rio Kid jumped forward, cutting off the man's retreat. Baker drew back, trapped, his lips twisted in a snarl. His Derringer swept up and spat. The bullet ripped along the Rio Kid's side. Baker dogged back the second hammer of the double-barreled weapon.

The Rio Kid had only a brief second in which to act. His hammers dropped and the Colts bucked back in his fists. The heavy slugs ripped the life from King Baker, driving the man back into the last row of chairs. The Derringer roared again but the bullet buried itself in the ceiling. Baker was dead when his body crashed into the chairs and slumped to the floor.

The fight was over. Most of the renegades had fled. Custer and Arden's roared orders directed the few soldiers who quickly rounded up the cowed renegades, checked the anger of the irate citizens. Della Grossman arose from beneath one of the heavy tables, shaken but unharmed. Custer strode to the bench and dragged the cowed judge up by the nape of the neck. He practically flung the man into the arms of the soldiers.

"Jail him until the new judge takes the bench. Hold Pedro Doma. I'll see the mayor about a new lawman, but you men will guard these prisoners until the regular sheriff takes charge."

The courtroom was quickly cleared and order restored. Custer went to find the mayor while the Rio Kid took charge of Celestino. They went to their hotel room. After the excitement of the fight, time seemed to drag, but at last a soldier knocked on the door.

"The General wants you at the Court House," he said and saluted the Rio Kid.

Once more the Rio Kid and Celestino entered the courtroom. It still showed marks of the morning's fight. The mayor of Billings sat on the bench and a husky teamster wore the lawman's badge.

Custer smiled at the Rio Kid and waved him forward. Brant Grossman, his daughter and John Arden stood there. To one side King Baker's judge shifted nervously from one foot to the other beside Pedro Doma. The judge rapped on the bench.

"Celestino Mireles, step forward." The young Mexican obeyed. "This court hereby releases you and absolves you from all charges brought against you. It holds Pedro Doma to answer for the murder of Scar Eggers. It holds Jed Carey to answer charges of veniality, prejudice and perjury in the office of judge. The court will also accept any suits for damages to be filed by the parties concerned."

Brant Grossman stepped forward. "By order of King Baker, certain of my stations have been destroyed and some of my men killed or wounded. I wish to file suit against the Montana Toll Company for recovery of damages."

"The court will accept the formal suit," the judge said with a nod. He lifted his gavel, but John Arden stepped forward.

"Your Honor, I believe a judge is empowered to perform a marriage ceremony."

"He is."

"Then Della and I, with her father's consent, would like to be married here and now."

"My consent!" Brant Grossman exclaimed and beamed. "Lord love yuh, young man, I've been wondering when yuh'd ask!"

* * * * *

LATE that evening Custer came to the Rio Kid's room. He looked in surprise at the bedrolls, ready for the journey that would start the next morning. The Rio Kid grinned.

"No use staying around, General, after the job is done. Idaho and King Baker are dead, the Montana Toll Company sewed up tight by Brant's suit. Looks like it's done."

"It is," Custer nodded and extended a telegram. "You'll be glad to see this."

Ashley's message was triumphant. It read:

TELEGRAPH BROUGHT WORD OF DISTURBANCE IN BILLINGS CAUSED BY BAKER. IT WAS LAST STRAW. LEGISLATURE PASSED LAW INVALIDATING TOLL COMPANIES AND FRANCHISES. NEW LAW WILL REGULATE FUTURE TOLL ROADS TO THE PUBLIC INTEREST. MY PERSONAL REGARDS AND THE THANKS OF MONTANA TERRITORY TO THE RIO KID FOR A SPLENDID JOB WELL DONE.

The Rio Kid returned the yellow paper with a flush of pleasure after passing it to Celestino.

"So the job is done, General. Me'n Celestino will be riding on," he said.

"Where?"

"I don't know. I reckon there's always a place that's infested with killing rats like Baker and Devlin. Seems like we ought to take a hand."

"You're right, Pryor. I'll wish you good luck and good-by now. I'm heading for Fort Smith at dawn. With the toll roads open, I can subdue the Indians."

He extended his hand and the Rio Kid accepted it in a firm clasp. Custer left and the Rio Kid sighed, then grinned at Celestino.

"Better get in a heap of sleep, *amigo*. We got a long trail to ride."

Celestino stretched luxuriously in the bed and his white teeth flashed in a wide grin.

"*Si*, my General. *Por dios*, some day there weel not be the renegade in the West, eh? Maybe we rest then."

"Not until then," the Rio Kid replied soberly. "Git to sleep."

"No Man Can Call Me a Traitor—and Live!"

YANKEE TRAVERS flung out the words: "I challenge you to a duel! If you've got any honor you'll meet me. Otherwise I'll hunt you down like a dog and kill you!"

The Rio Kid's tones were as cold as ice.

"You name the place," he said. "And I still maintain that any man who wants to start slavery in this state, or any other, is a traitor to his country!"

Travers was a demon with a pistol, but the Rio Kid felt he could take care of himself, and he prepared for the duel—only one of the many thrilling scenes in next issue's smashing novel!

It's a novel in which the Rio Kid puts everything into the fight to protect the Chinese in California from their oppressors. It's a novel in which such famous historical characters as General John C. Fremont, John W. Searles, Don Antonio Coronel, and Alexander Godey play important roles.

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By DEAN OWEN

Next Issue's Featured Complete Bob Pryor Novel! Look forward to it!

Poncho took the sharp turn like a well-trained cow pony

A GUN FOR BRONCO

By JOHN C. ROPKE

Ace Parker planned to win Bronco Davis' mustangs, but you never can tell what will happen in a horse race!

DESPITE his haste, "Bronco" Davis was doing some tall figuring as he hazed his bunch of half wild mustangs across the Kansas prairie toward the town of Bitter Springs. Bronco didn't have much book learning, except what his mother had been able to pound into his brain before she died, and the figuring he was doing came hard.

There were eight mustangs in his

bunch, and as Bronco approached Pop Sutter's livery stable at the end of the town's main street, he finally settled on five dollars as a figure. Five dollars a head, Bronco reckoned, was a good price for a half wild bronc, and the most he could expect. Especially from tight fisted Pop Sutter. Besides, five was a nice round figure, easier to calculate than, say, four and a quarter or three seventy-five.

When Bronco had left his place back in the hills two days before, he had dreamed of selling the broncs at ten dollars a head. But as the miles passed under his sorrel's plodding hoofs, the fantastic dream became less vivid, and reality had lowered the figure.

Bronco turned his bunch into the corral beside the livery stable. As he closed the bars after them, he saw Pop Sutter at the open door of the stables. Bronco smiled and waved, but Pop pretended not to notice him. Yet Bronco knew the old man could give a minute description of every horse Bronco had turned into the corral.

Bronco walked his horse toward the stable and dismounted near Pop. He stretched his skinny, six-foot three frame, until he seemed to dwarf the sorrel beside him.

Most folks didn't like Pop. He was too gruff. But Bronco had found him a pretty good sort, where money wasn't concerned. Now Pop shot a liquid stream of tobacco juice into the dirt and wiped his chin with the back of his hand.

"Bronco," he drawled. "That sorrel you're riding is the sorriest looking critter I've ever set eyes on. He wouldn't even make good buzzard meat. But I'll give you ten dollars for him."

Bronco grinned. Most folks made some similar comment about Poncho. The sorrel had a plodding, lazy walk. His head bobbed loosely at each step he took, and his heavy lidded eyes were always half closed.

"Shucks, Pop," Bronco said. "There ain't enough money in Kansas to buy Poncho. I reckon he does look half dead most of the time, but that's because there ain't nothin' for him to get riled up about. But if you're aimin' to get somewheres in a real hurry, why I guess Poncho will get you there quicker than any horse in the state. I reckon you know that, Pop."

THEY stood facing each other in silence for long minutes then. Bronco rolled a smoke and tried hard not to show any expression. For there was a big change in the man who stood before him since he had seen him last.

For the first time since Bronco had known him, Pop was clean shaven. Instead of his usual dirty vest over his long sleeved underwear, Pop was sporting a clean white shirt. Wide, black suspenders, and a new belt held up the man's Sunday pants.

Bronco always got a kick out of seeing Pop's belt and suspenders. Why Pop wore either was a mystery to Bronco. For the man's enormous stomach would have held up a bank.

"Give you fifty dollars for the crow bait you just turned into the corral, Bronco," Pop said suddenly. "It's more than they're worth, but I reckon you can use the money."

Yeah, Bronco thought, he sure could use the money. He and his father had been in the wild horse country for six years now, ever since Bronco was twelve, and except for the clothes on their backs, they didn't have a thing to show. It was the very barrenness of the country that had killed his mother the first year.

Bronco looked over Pop's shoulder and for the first time saw the horses. Every stall was occupied. Then Bronco looked up the main street and became aware of the unusual activity. Three buckboards were in front of Miller's general store. Slack legged saddle horses lined the hitch racks on both sides of the street.

"What's all going on, Pop?" he drawled casually. "A little early for the rodeo, ain't it?"

Pop shrugged. "That's the way it's been for a couple of weeks now. Town's full of people. All of 'em going to that there Cherokee Strip opening." Pop spat and eyed the mushroom of dust it raised. "Why don't you go, Bronco? With that sorrel of yours you'd probably get a right nice section of land."

Bronco thought about that. The idea

sure was worth considering. There wasn't much wild stuff up in the hills any more, and he hadn't seen a big cat in years. It hadn't been too bad the first few years, what with plenty of mustangs, and collecting the bounty on cat skins, but there sure wasn't any use living in that country any more.

"Well, son, what do you say?" Pop snapped. "Is it a deal? Fifty dollars cash for the whole bunch, not including your sorrel, of course."

Bronco shrugged. Things were happening too fast for him. Pop all spruced up like he was going to church, the town full of strangers on their way to the Strip, and mostly it was Pop's actions. Usually Pop offered two or two fifty a head, and it took a lot of trading talk before they finally came to an agreement. Now here was Pop offering better than five dollars a head. Things sure didn't add up.

"I got to think about it, Pop," he drawled finally. He mounted his sorrel then and rode slowly up the street, the horse's hoofs kicking up the dust as he went.

And Bronco had eyes only for the horses as he rode. There wasn't a sleek one in the bunch. They were all a bit gaunt, like they had come a long way and kept on the move. Many of them were farm animals, for Bronco saw the marks of collar and traces on the dusty hides.

Bronco dismounted in front of Miller's store and spent a half hour looking at the display in the window. There were a lot of things there a young fellow like he could use, but Bronco had eyes only for a pearl handled gun that hung on a nail in the back.

The gun was in a Mexican stamped leather holster, the cartridge belt studded with conchas. It was, Bronco thought, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He had been eyeing it now for over three years, and had made up his mind to buy it some day. But thirty-five dollars was sure a lot of money. Especially when a fellow didn't even have thirty-five cents, and wasn't likely to have it for a long time.

Bronco finally got up enough nerve to go into the store and ask old man Miller to let him try on the gun. He did that every time he came to town, and Miller understood. For a long time after he left the store, Bronco could feel the slap of that leather holster against the worn leg of his buckskin trousers.

After sunset he rode the two miles out of town to the springs. He built a small fire, hobbled Poncho, and leaning back against the saddle he stared into the embers.

ABRUPTLY the cry of a meadow lark drowned out the incessant hum of the insects for a second, but Bronco didn't hear. Nor did he hear the soft chuckling of the spring, or the deep throated honk of the frogs that lived on its border. Bronco was thinking of ways and means of getting that gun in Miller's window.

The fire was almost dead, and the faint streak of dawn was putting out the pale light of the stars when Bronco saddled his sorrel. The horse caught something of his master's excitement and woke from his lethargy enough to trot the two miles into town.

The sun was fanning over Horse Head Mountain when Bronco led his eight head of mustangs from Sutter's corral. Pop Sutter stuck his tousled gray head from a frameless window in the loft above the stable and growled his annoyance.

"What in blazes you doin', Bronco? Wakin' a man up in the middle of the night! Ain't you got more respect for your elders? If I was ten years younger, I'd fan yuh good!"

Then, suddenly, Pop realized what Bronco was doing. "Hey! What you doin'? Thought you were goin' to sell me those mangy broncos?"

Bronco grinned and shrugged. "Changed my mind, Pop," he drawled. "I ain't sellin'—not for no fifty dollars anyways. But you can still have 'em—if you'll pay me exactly twenty-five dollars a head."

Pop almost fell out of the window. "Twenty-five dollars! Are you drunk, Bronco? Why—"

But Bronco didn't stay to hear any more. Maybe he *was* drunk. Drunk with wanting that pearl handled gun. And

he wasn't going to let Pop Sutter sober him up.

An hour later, when the main street began to live, curiosity pulled folks to the rope corral that Bronco had strung up in the center of the street. His mustangs were there, and acting spooky from seeing and smelling so many strange things.

There was a sign in front of the rope corral. A plain piece of board with letters burned into it with a running iron. It read:

HORSES
GARANTED FAST
$25.00

Folks read the sign with a smile, nodded pleasantly to the tall, skinny youngster on the sorrel in front of the corral, then eyed the mustangs with interest. Except for three of the horses, they were a jug-headed, wild looking lot. But their movements were quick, and all of them looked well fed and rested. The three that were the exception were bigger and showed a trace of western stock ancestry.

In the next hour Bronco saw more people than he usually saw in a whole year. The town had been crowded the day before, but more folks had come in during the night. And in that hour Bronco sold the three big horses.

No salesmanship was needed on his part. Those horses sold themselves. These folks realized how important a fresh, fast horse would be when they raced across the strip for choice sections, and those who could afford it snapped up the three horses.

But Bronco began to realize he was going to have to use some persuasion to sell the remaining five. At first he had been afraid to put this scheme into action, figuring he would be laughed at for his price. But when he sold the first horse he almost fell off Poncho with surprise. Now he was a trifle sorry he hadn't made the price of the three horses higher.

"Gents!" he drawled suddenly, trying to imitate the man who sold saddle blankets at the rodeo. "Gents, there ain't a horse on this street, exceptin' my mustangs here, who are in any condition to run a hard race. It took a heap of travelin' to get here, and them critters are plumb tired out. But you don't see no circles under my horse's eyes from lack of rest."

The crowd grinned good naturedly and Bronco heard a few chuckles of amusement. He took courage at that and he straightened in the saddle. He pointed to a wiry chestnut that had been raising a ruckus and had just settled down.

"Now that there chestnut," he continued. "Hornet is his handle. It took me and Poncho here," Bronco slapped the sleepy eyed sorrel's neck, "two days to catch that horse. Must of covered all of sixty miles, and at fast travelin', before I could get near enough to swing a loop."

"Did you say *fast* travelin', son? That sorrel of yours looks to me like he'd fall down from over exertion if he moved faster than a walk."

THERE were laughs at the remark and Bronco felt the color creep up his neck and flush his face. Bronco didn't mind remarks about Poncho from folks who knew the horse, but from a stranger it got his dander up.

He looked through the crowd to find who had made the remark. And it wasn't hard to find him. He was a big man, as tall as Bronco, but with enough weight to fill out his big frame.

He wore a pearl gray Dakota hat, and his black three quarter coat didn't conceal the bulk of the gun he carried in the belt of his iron gray trousers. He stood several feet in back of the crowd, and the wire thin lips that held a dangling cigarette smiled up at Bronco.

"Stranger, it didn't take no shucks of thinkin' to tell you don't know good horse flesh when you see it," Bronco said softly. "I'm bettin' you never saw a horse that could show Poncho his dust."

The man kept smiling, squinting from the smoke that ribboned from his dangling cigarette.

"I've got a horse at the livery stable at the end of the street," the big man said pleasantly. "He ain't much, but I'll bet he could run that bag of bones of yours right into the ground without half trying."

It was "that bag of bones" that got Bronco. He leaned forward and grinned at the man.

"How much you bettin'?"

The crowd was silent now, enjoying the action. Most of them were amused at Broncho's anger, but a few of them, men who knew horses, looked at Poncho with new interest, and nodded.

"You name the price, son." The big man was grinning. "The sky's the limit."

Bronco remembered the sale of the three horses, felt the weight of the money, like a pot of found gold in his shirt pocket. He tried to keep his voice calm as he spoke.

"Will seventy-five dollars be too much?"

The sudden roar of laughter from the crowd spooked the mustangs and they went to kicking. They settled down as the laughter became amused chuckles.

"Seventy-five dollars it is, son," the big man smiled. "We'll run them right after noon time, shall we? A mile, I think, would be a fair test."

A little later, back at the livery stable, Pop Sutter was scolding Bronco.

"Bronco, you're a crazy fool," Pop was saying for the third time. "What in tarnation ever made you make a fool bet like that?"

Bronco sat on top of the corral and kept smoking in silence. Shaking his head in disgust, Pop climbed up and sat beside him.

"Look, son," Pop exclaimed. "That gent you made the bet with is Ace Parker. Even you must have heard of him. He's just about the slickest customer west of the Mississippi. You ain't got no more chance of beating him than you have of flying."

Bronco pushed his weather-beaten sombrero to the back of his head with a long brown finger. "I ain't racing this Parker fella, Pop. Poncho and I are racing his horse. It ain't man against man, Pop. It's horse against horse. And you know what Poncho can do."

Pop Sutter sighed and shrugged. There was silence for several minutes, and when Pop spoke again his voice was soft.

"Bronco, do you know what this Parker gent is doing in town?" he began. "Well, he's going to the strip. He's at every land opening. That is, when he isn't fleecing greenhorns out of their money at some poker table. It's a business with him, son. He and four or five of his men, mounted on the best horses in the country, enter every strip opening. Naturally they get the best sections in the strip. Then they sell them to folks who ain't as fortunate, but who have the money to pay."

It was a long time before Bronco spoke. "So that's why he tried to make a fool of me," he finally drawled. "It ain't like I thought. He knows horses, knows 'em well. He seen that those mustangs of mine were a likely looking lot. He figured they'd give his riders a little trouble—maybe get to some of those good sections ahead of his own men."

Pop snorted. "That's what I been trying to tell you for the last half hour. Sure he knows horses. And his gelding will finish so far ahead of Poncho that you won't even be able to give those mustangs away as a gift. Folks are going to laugh you right out of town for being such a gullible, weak-minded, danged fool."

Bronco thought this over for a long time. "You really figure that this Parkers' gelding can beat Poncho, Pop?"

Pop sighed and climbed from the corral fence. "Come on with me, Bronco," he said over his shoulders as he headed for the stable. "I'll show you that gelding and you can judge for yourself."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Bronco was inclined to agree with Pop that Poncho didn't have much chance. The gelding was a black, a big rangy animal with the sleek, powerful lines of a racer. He had a small intelligent head, on a long muscular neck. And even the restless motion of the horse in the stall showed effortless grace and power.

"That's a Kentucky horse, son. A thoroughbred. Poncho won't stand a chance." Pop put his hand on Bronco's shoulder. "Why don't you leave town and forget this danged race this afternoon? You got seventy-five dollars now, and I'll give you five dollars a head for the mustangs you didn't sell. The folks

will be moving on today or tomorrow and it will be all forgotten."

Bronco was thinking of the pearl handled gun in Miller's window. If he did what Pop suggested he could leave town with a hundred dollars. That was sixty more than he and his father had figured they'd get. And Bronco was sure his father would let him keep thirty-five dollars for himself to buy that gun the next time he came to town.

He eyed the gelding again and nodded in appreciation.

"That sure is some horse!" he said. "Funny how that horse can come so far and still look as if he ain't been ridden for a month."

Pop chuckled. "Parker don't ride him, boy. He rides that buckskin in the next stall, mostly. Leastways till he gets to the strip. Rest of the time the gelding here totes nothing but a light pack."

Bronco nodded. "That's smart. Just uses him for a pack horse, huh?"

Pop nodded and Bronco turned and strode from the stable. He stopped outside the open door and stood looking across the Kansas prairies. When he turned he was grinning, and Pop didn't have to ask if he was going to leave town. Pop knew he wasn't.

It was late afternoon before they finally lined up at the end of town for the race. Everybody in town was there to watch, and odds were ten to one in favor of the gelding, with no takers.

Parker's gelding was nervous, prancing, anxious to be off. Poncho just stood there, rear left leg slack, his head down as though he dozed. There were kidding remarks, but Bronco tried not to hear.

"Ace" Parker, riding straight and easy in his saddle, pointed to a tree ahead of them on the prairie. "That looks to be about a half mile," he said. "Let's make it to there and back. We'll pass on the left side. All right with you, son?"

Bronco nodded and the pressure of his knees brought Poncho's head up with sudden interest. Bronco leaned slightly forward in the saddle and Poncho lost his sleepy-eyed look.

It was the bartender from Bill Grey's saloon that touched it off. And for the first time in the three years that Bronco had ridden Poncho, he gave him the heel. And the sorrel leaped forward like a startled deer.

Poncho was all horse now as he raced across the rolling prairie. He had gotten the jump on the gelding and led by a half length. They went across the grama grass like that, Poncho running all out and keeping that half length ahead he had gained at the start.

But Bronco knew the gelding hadn't opened up. He could tell by the way the horse was running, his head bobbing gently, showing no sign of strain. But Parker wasn't trying to hold him in. As they approached the tree, Parker began quirting the gelding, shouting his curses, trying to get his animal really to move.

Poncho took the turn sharp, like a well trained Western cow pony should. Then he was racing back toward the town, his hoofs seeming to barely touch the carpet of grass. But the gelding took a wide turn, too wide, and Parker kept him wide as he took after Bronco.

And now Parker had the gelding really running. The horse had his head stretched forward, and he closed the gap with surprising ease.

But he had too much ground to make up for the wide turn. Poncho was lucky to beat him by a full length. And nobody knew better than Bronco that if the race had another halfmile to go, Poncho would have eaten the gelding's dust.

Back at Pop Sutter's stable, Bronco was changing his sign. He was blotting out the twenty-five-dollar mark and making it fifty. And he knew he wouldn't have any trouble selling them at that price either.

POP finally took the board sign away from him and held it behind his back. "Dang your eyes, Bronco, are you going to tell me how you did it? Or do I have to pistol whip you?"

Bronco grinned. "How did I do what, Pop?"

Pop almost swallowed his chaw in his anger.

"You know what I mean!" he growled. "Poncho never saw the day he could beat that gelding and you know it!"

(Concluded on page 96)

At the sharp crack of Don Federico's rifle the Apache dropped to the ground

An Exciting Novelet

WHO'LL RIDE

CHAPTER I

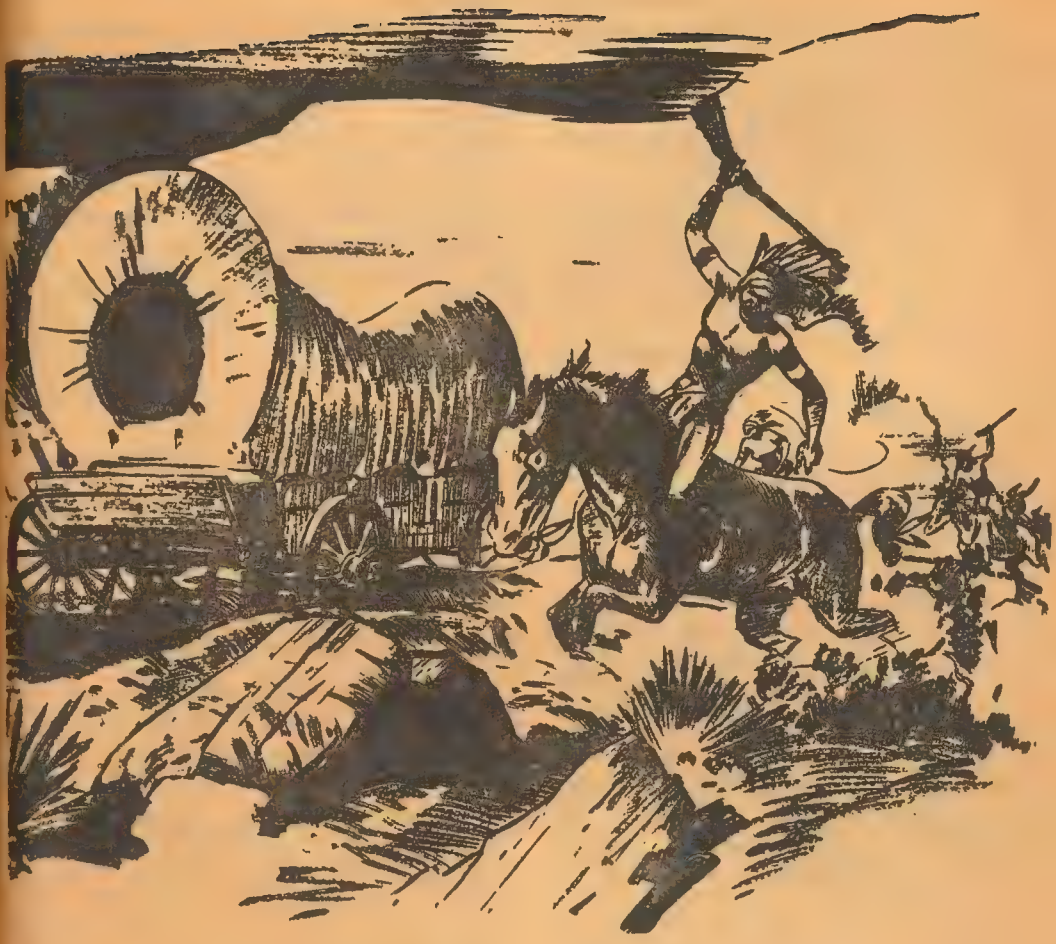
The Half-Breed, Toribio

OFF on the rim of the heat-drenched mesa, a cloud of dust appeared, speeding rapidly nearer along the twisting wagon trail through the cactus. The somnolent and dispirited horses and mules on the picket line of the cavalry camp, raised their heads as a ringing challenge came from the sentry post farthest out.

"Corporal of the Guard!" came his yell. "Number Three!"

But the camp was already astir. The blue shirted, sky-blue-trousered-and-booted cavalry troopers had seen the dust. A tall young officer came out of the wall-tent near where the scarlet tinted cavalry guidon drooped lazily on its staff. His gray eyes swiftly appraised the length and height of the advancing dust cloud.

Lieutenant Hawkins of the Cavalry Had His



WITH ME

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

From the tent behind him came an older officer, wearing the single silver bar of a first lieutenant. His pudgy face was red and worried looking.

"Those may be hostile Apaches, Mr. Hawkins!" he wheeezed. "What are you standing here for? Take measures to repel them!"

Art Terry was a middle-aged, gray-haired civilian scout, clad in a faded dark serge suit. His narrow brimmed black hat was tilted back as he lounged up, whittling a stick with a heavy clasp knife. He looked briefly toward the rolling cloud before he spoke.

"Injuns out here in Arizona Territory don't ride slam bang into sojers thataway," he drawled, lazily. "Them there fellers is white men, I'd say—and in a all-fired hurry, too." He busied himself leisurely, at his whittling. "Besides, they got a wagon with 'em, and Injuns never travel with wagons, leastaways, not around here."

Own Way of Combating the Apache Warriors!

The pudgy first lieutenant glared at the scout.

"You can't know that at this distance!" he snapped, and turned to the tall young officer. "Mr. Hawkins! Have the men assembled and ready!"

The old scout closed his clasp knife with a snap, took one long look at the pudgy lieutenant, then sauntered away.

"Do you want them mounted?" the younger officer who also was a first lieutenant, asked patiently.

"Why—er—mounted, of course."

HAWKINS, whose height was accentuated by the yellow stripe on his trousers, raised his hand upwards, pointing to the horse lines. A heavily muscled first sergeant bellowed out a command and the quiet camp boiled with sudden energy.

Troopers ran to the horse lines, bearing their saddles. There was a sudden flurry of tossing horses heads and manes, quick, silent adjustment of girths and the men led out their mounts and began to fall into formation. Soon the forty men of the cavalry command were lined up at their horses heads, ready and waiting. The sergeant bellowed, "At ease!" and the men relaxed.

"What's nervous Nellie up to now?" a trooper asked the man next to him, glancing at the pudgy first lieutenant. Three days of alarms and discussions by this recently joined officer had left the cavalry detachment worn out and exasperated. By devious routes the present commander had come to them from the Quartermaster Corps, to fight the most savage, elusive enemy in the world—the bloodthirsty and cruel Apaches of the Southwest.

"Leftenant Lowden thinks he's Napoleon Boneypart," said Bannion in his rich brogue. Bannion's sleeves still showing the marks of the sergeant's chevrons recently removed. "Day before yesterday he says to me, 'Sargint, ivry souldier holds a field marshal's baton in his knapsack.' Sure, Oi was carrying a few dhrinks under me belt at the toime, so I reminds him we don't have knapsacks in the calvary at all, at all. And wid that Lowden throws me in the clink for disrayspict and rejuces me to the ranks."

Meantime all eyes were fixed on the mesa and that ever nearing dust cloud which now disclosed a light wagon with four or five riders, sombrero-hatted and riding high-pommeled Mexican saddles, galloping beside it.

The wagon was now near enough for details to be distinguished. It was being driven by a swarthy Mexican *mojo*. Beside him, on the seat, was a slim attractive girl. At her right, mounted on a thoroughbred-horse, rode a distinguished-looking gray-bearded Mexican, hawk-nosed and keen-faced—one of the *gente fino* ranch owners from across the nearby Border. Behind the wagon galloped three Mexican vaqueros, heavily armed.

The small party came racing around some adobe shacks and drew up, amid a sudden spurt of *caliche* dust, beside the sentry.

The elderly Mexican's eyes lighted up with pleasure at the sight of Lieutenant Hawkins.

"*Gracias a Dios!* We have come through safely." He swept off his silver encrusted sombrero, speaking in rapid Spanish. Hawkins' eyes rested for a second on the girl. Subconsciously he also noted the Indian arrow embedded in the rear of the wagon and the trace of blood on the off-mule. There was also a bullet-splintered spoke in the near hind wheel.

"Dismount and rest, Senor Don Federico," Hawkins answered in smooth Spanish.

"A thousand thanks, *Senor Teniente,* but my old *enimigo,* Toribio, is abroad in the land again. We fought off six of his Apaches, and learned that Toribio intends to move southward and attack my hacienda this night. Now we must hurry on to warn our people and ready them for defense."

"We would be happy to aid in defeating Toribio, if you and your daughter will wait until we finish our preparations."

The old grandee threw up his head proudly. "Many thanks, *Senor Teniente,*" he said drily. "We have no need of aid."

"*Seguramente,* Don Federico," returned Hawkins smoothly. At this moment Lieutenant Lowden's peevish voice broke into the conversation.

"Who are these people and what is this all about?" he truculently demanded.

The warm glance of Senorita Isabel which had been fixed upon young Hawkins turned inquiringly toward Lowden.

"Sorry, sir," said the younger officer. "These are old friends of mine. Permit me to introduce Senorita Isobel de la Fuente and her father, Don Federico de la Fuente."

ISOBEL inclined her head, the old Don bowed, but Lowden gave them only a curt nod.

"They bring news," Hawkins went on quietly. "The notorious half-breed Mexican, Toribio, has allied himself with the Apaches. Tonight they are raiding the rancho of Don Federico."

"But what has this to do with us?" asked the pudgy commander.

Lieutenant Hawkins shrugged. "Hasn't General Miles ordered us, at all costs, to capture Toribio, dead or alive. Such orders were sent here, personally, by General Miles before your arrival. I respectfully suggest that we move out immediately."

"Nonsense!" spluttered Lowden. "I would have to make careful study of the situation before making any such move. But first I'd have to receive confirmation from General Miles that those are his orders."

Hawkins stiffened slightly. His voice became formal.

"I'm afraid, sir, that any delay would lose us the opportunity of capturing Toribio," he said.

"Lieutenant Hawkins is right," spoke up Art Terry. "He ain't tellin' you why he's so sure we can git this Toribio round somewheres near Don Federico's rancho. This Toribio is aimin' to carry off the old Don's daughter, who's settin' right there in that wagon. That's why Toribio j'ined up with them Injuns—so's he could raid the ranch and steal the gal. Toribio! Shucks, he's a heap sight worse'n any Apache. This is one fine chance to catch up with him."

"All talk, talk," broke in Lowden irritably. "Campaigns aren't won that way. Our proper procedure would be to pick up the trail and pursue him—if there was a trail."

Old Terry spat out a quid of tobacco. "Injun tracks don't mean nothin," answered the scout. "An Injun is where yuh find him. This Toribio is worse'n any Apache, the chances is pretty strong that Toribio and them Apaches are hightailin' towards Don Federico's ranch tonight."

"That may or may not be," retorted Lowden tartly. "When I want civilian advice on running military operations I'll ask for it."

"That's all right by me, Loot'nent. The Army pays me for guidin' troops where the Apaches is—not where they ain't." With this, old Terry, one of the three best scouts in the Territory, moved over to the wagon and began to study the arrow which had been so firmly embedded in the vehicle.

Don Federico glanced at the sun. Already it was dipping toward the west. He flung an order to his ranch hands. Senorita Isabel leaned toward Lieutenant Hawkins.

"Who is that fat and stupid man?" she asked him, silvery voiced. "He stands here and talks while Apaches are killing people. We go now, *Tiente* Hawkeens." Her voice trembled slightly. "Perhaps we shall see each other soon again—yes?"

"Lieutenant Lowden is new to this country," returned Hawkins as the Mexican driver picked up the reins. "We shall see each other presently, the sooner the better. Go with God, *Isabelita mia.*"

Already Don Federico was bowing formally from the saddle. With a sweep of his sombrero he led his little cavalcade out of the camp, and they were gone, careening out of sight behind the nearest butte to the southward in a swirl of white *caliche* dust.

"The information from chance civilians is insufficient as a basis for military action," came the pontifical tones of Lowden.

His oration was interrupted by a shout from the end of the picket line. A soldier was waving and pointing at a pinnacle of rock which towered up, some six miles to the westward.

A blinding flash came from its topmost part, then disappeared, to be followed by more flashes. Three of the men

on the flank of the formed company hastily unstrapped a leather case from one of the pack mules and set up two small compact tripods, one with a shutter arrangement and the other with two adjustable mirrors set upon a pivoted bar.

In a matter of a few seconds they had adjusted the two tripods and beamed a steady flash of light across the mesa to the distant peak. Lieutenant Hawkins, meanwhile, had taken out his notebook and pencil to jot down the message of this new heliostat signal device that General Miles had so recently introduced into the Territory.

A succession of flashes from the peak acknowledged the open station and then steadied down to a rapid sending of flashing dots and dashes across the miles of heat drenched desert.

HAWKINS' face grew somber as he transcribed the rapid message. It came to an end with the steady broad flash, unblinking, to denote, "station open." He glanced with troubled eyes at the butte behind which the little Mexican cavalcade had disappeared. A frown darkened the brow of the young officer.

"Our Mexican friends were right," he said, low-voiced, to Lowden. "The message reads: 'Large band, estimate fifty men, moving rapidly southeast on Pilares trail towards Hacienda de la Fuente.' It's signed Timmons, sergeant. That's Toribio's band."

"He's got a pack of Chiricahuas," said old Terry. "That was a Chiricahua arrow in the wagon. Ordinary Tonto Apache is bad enough, Loot'nent, but the Chiricahuas is plumb pizen." He spoke to Lowden who gazed at him blankly.

"Terry is right," continued Hawkins. "Are we moving out at once, sir?"

"When I want your suggestions, Mr. Hawkns, I'll ask for them," returned Lowden acidly. "I wish to impress upon you younger officers the necessity of careful preparation, of planning like a fox and striking like an eagle." Lowden had read that somewhere and was very fond of the phrase, rolling it out oracularly upon every occasion.

Lieutenant Hawkins and the old scout glanced at each other, their faces expressionless. Hawkins turned and stared at the lengthening shadows of the mesquite and Spanish bayonet on the mesa before them and at the sun slowly moving downward to the western horizon.

The young lieutenant's thoughts were centered upon that little group of Mexicans and especially Isabel. He repressed a shudder as he recalled sights he had seen in the wake of Apache raids—smoke-blackened, violated, tortured and murdered bodies of women blackening under the pitiless sun.

There was a faint, a very faint chance that Isabel and her father would reach the strong adobe walls of their ranchhouse before the speeding Apaches could cut them off. Inwardly he raged at his own helplessness and the strict bonds of discipline that prevented him from doing the sensible and logical thing. This would be moving out immediately in this Heaven sent opportunity to smash Toribio and the Apache raiders. He glanced at Lowden.

CHAPTER II

A Renegade Strikes

WITH his hands clasped behind his back and his head bowed in thought, the pudgy senior lieutenant was now striding back and forth. There was something vaguely familiar about his appearance, and Hawkins frowned for a moment or two before he got it. Lowden was aping the great Corsican, Napoleon Bonaparte, his personal hero. Despite his anxiety, Hawkins had to suppress a smile. Then he spoke softly.

"Much honor and promotion would come to the officer who captures Toribio," he said, addressing no one in particular. On hearing these words, Lowden stopped and turned.

"Call Sergeant Heintz," he ordered and soon the worried looking sergeant had joined the group. After saluting he stood rigidly at attention.

"I have made an important decision,

Mr. Hawkins and Sergeant Heintz," Lowden announced pompously, with his right hand within his shirt. He was still in the role of the great Bonaparte. "I have made a very important decision. We will capture this bandit renegade Toribio and all his men."

"Yes, sir." Sergeant Heintz stared woodenly to the front, waiting.

"This will not be easy." Lowden cocked his head, bird-like. "It will require organization, careful planning and intense concentration upon the grave problem in hand." Hawkins glanced again at the westering sun and sighed. "I expect, I expect every man in this detachment to support me with all his enthusiasm and *élan*." Sergeant Heintz blinked.

"Yes, sir," he replied blankly. "When do we move out, sir?"

"Ah!" said Lowden. "I will inform you of that later. In the meantime, Sergeant, you will have the horses watered and the men fed, keeping all in readiness. You, Mr. Hawkins, will check the company accounts at the store and settle any balance that may be due."

Hawkins repressed a desire to protest as he noticed the long violet shadows beginning to creep across the mesa.

"We must leave everything in order," Lowden continued unperturbed. "When I give the command to move out, you, Mr. Hawkins, will remain behind with a detail to guard our camp against any sudden attack while we are absent!" Hawkins looked his astonishment. Sergeant Heintz' eyes widened in dismay.

Old Terry cleared his throat. "Mebbe we'll run into trouble, Loot'nent, especially after gittin' sich a late start," the scout drawled. "And Lieutenant Hawkins here shore knows the country and fightin' against the Injuns." But Lowden refused to listen.

"Those are my orders and I will brook no discussion of them," he announced. He waved his hand loftily, and strode to his tent, still maintining the outward appearance of the Little Corporal. . . .

Meanwhile Don Federico, galloping easily beside the mule-drawn wagon carrying Senorita Isabel, kept a hawklike eye roving over the arid terrain as his little cavalcade sped towards the ranch and safety. They were within some three miles of the little spring-watered valley when he raised his head sharply.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he breathed. His quick eyes had caught sight of a party of horsemen pouring forth from a depression in the desert. Rapidly he figured his chances. A final spurt of tired mules and horses might save them from being cut off.

With a sharp cry he pointed out the danger and, with his ranch riders, plied quirt to horse and mule. The distant force of Apaches sighted them at the same instant and a high pitched yell echoed over the mesa as the two groups speeded up on lines which might or might not converge in the next half mile.

The enemy group was composed of small sinewy Chiricahuas, snake-eyed, their black hair held back by red calico bands, naked save for breech clouts and leggin-length riding moccasins. Many were armed with repeating rifles in addition to their bows, arrows and feather tipped lances.

Ahead of them rode a heavy, compact man, his greater frame showing the heritage of his Mexican father. But his small black eyes and his high cheekbones revealed all of the sensual cruelty of his Apache mother. This half breed had the evils of both races and none of the good qualities of either.

José Toribio, the outlaw renegade, had recently become the most deadly chieftain under Geronimo. His lootings and burnings and his massacres already had made his name a symbol of terror throughout the Territory. His heritage of white blood had led him to desire the beautiful daughter of Don Federico. Now the strength of his obsession left him shaking when he espied that little cavalcade almost within his grasp. But it abated not one whit the craftiness of his leadership. Over his shoulder he flung a gutteral command in Apache.

"*Enju!*" came the hoarse response. A sub-leader swung out from the main trail and rode with some ten horsemen, to cut in between the fleeing Mexican group and their haven, the ranchhouse.

Continuing on with his main force, Toribio shouted another command. They were almost within rifle shot distance

of the racing wagon. Two Chiricahua warriors, armed with repeating rifles, rode off to one side, weapons at the ready, nodding that they understood their instructions to aim only at the mules.

As the distance lessened, the two warriors began to fire, their bullets landing ever more closely to the wagon, as the distance decreased.

Suddenly a shout of triumph went up from the warriors. The offside mule had fallen heavily. The other mule staggered along trying to drag the weight of harness and his dead companion. The little cavalcade came to a sudden halt. . . .

Lieutenant Hawkins, boiling inwardly at the hopelessness of getting the stubborn commander to move in time to accomplish anything, strode down to the group of adobe shacks that composed the neighboring small settlement. Dominating it was the long shedlike building housing the general store, with its high porch for easy loading into canvas-topped wagons and its dim interior, rich with the smell of spices and cloth and leather and cheese.

The store was complete even to the crowd of men lounging within its comparatively cool interior. There was no friendliness to the tall young Army officer in the group. The civilians in the Territory needed and wanted the protection of the Army, but were none too grateful for the law that went with it.

They were a tough and independent crowd—cowpunchers, wagon drivers, prospectors, gamblers and other and more dubious types. They were the kind that keep ahead of the law, on the frontiers, with a generous leavening of decent men who eventually would be the backbone of the new communities.

Hawkins nodded to the group as he went by, but they made no move to return his greeting. The storekeeper, himself a soured and dour individual, also failed to return his civil good evening as he brought out the accounts and made change. There was a snicker behind Hawkins from the group of civilians.

He heard a man's voice. "Mebbe he carries perfume in it to squirt on the squaws," the voice said.

A LAUGH went up at the sally. Another voice dissented gravely.

"No 'tain't. It's a gold plated jewel case full of rubies and diamonds!"

Again came that snicker, and Hawkins knew they were talking about his revolver, a non-regulation weapon he'd won at a target match in Tucson. Its splendid shooting qualities were masked by an ornate ivory and gold ornamented butt.

Hawkins sensed that he was being watched by the derisive idlers. Flushing deeply, he turned. A round-faced, black-mustached man with an extravagant silk flowered bandanna around his neck, was grinning mockingly. Now he spoke to Hawkins.

"Mighty flossy lookin' weapon you got there, General," he remarked in a voice of studied insolence.

"Yes, kind of flossy," Hawkins agreed.

"Must keep yuh awake nights guardin' that there piece of joolery," the black-mustached man went on.

"Haw-haw!" chortled someone in the rear. Hawkins looked at the amused one.

"You ought to take something for those hiccoughs, stranger," the lieutenant said gravely. "They might turn into galloping consumption." The dark-mustached one grimaced unpleasantly.

"I heard tell that a soldier hit a barn with one of them things once," he said. This brought another snicker from the crowd. "Mebbe you think yuh can hit something with that gold plated scent-sprinkler?"

"Maybe I know I can," Hawkins responded. He reached between the band of his trousers and his shirt where he carried his personal money in a buckskin belt. The men watched him as he brought forth a handful of gold pieces.

"As a matter of fact there's no maybe about it. Here's two hundred dollars that says I can outshoot you, afoot or on horseback, at any target you want to pick and at any range you want to select. How about it. Do you or your friends want to put up or shut up?"

He looked around invitingly, jingling the gold pieces. Two hundred dollars was a lot of money to those men—not to mention a second lieutenant. But no

one took the bet. Hawkins put the money back in his belt with a mock sigh of disappointment and turned his back, to continue checking the accounts on the counter.

The black-mustached man brooded over his defeat. Hawkins forgot about him for the nonce as he heard trumpet notes from the camp, blowing "Assembly."

In a few more minutes his strained ears heard the clatter of hoofs as the cavalrymen moved out. He was suddenly seething with a black rage.

His company was leaving, an hour late, to tackle one of the wiliest and most dangerous foes in the Southwest, in command of a man who didn't know the answers. He thought with instant and swift concern of all the hard-bitten men who made up that famous fighting outfit, and he grew bitter at the useless risk of their lives under inept leadership.

At this unfortunate moment the black-mustached man tried to reassert himself. His harsh voice came to Hawkins' ears.

"Hey, you feller, listen!" The words and the tone were pointedly insulting.

Turning, Hawkins looked the man over slowly, from the tip of his spurs to the top of his big hat, even then paying little heed to what the man was saying.

"If I_catch any soldier monkeyin' 'round my gal again, I'll fill him full of lead, sure as my name's Buck Silver."

These last words permeated to Hawkins' undertsanding.

"I don't know your girl," Hawkins said shortly. "I don't know you. You look after your own women and I'll look after my men. But here's how I regard your threats." His voice suddenly thundered forth in anger. He towered over the man Silver like a threatening cloud of wrath. "Better change your ideas quick! You use a gun on one of my men, and I'll hunt you down with my whole company, like a bloodthirsty Apache. And personally fill you full of lead slugs. Get that?"

His eyes were blazing as he stood over Silver. The man with the black mustache shrank back, unnerved by the cold stare of the young officer.

THE nervous storekeeper came from behind his counter and approached the group.

"You hadn't orta do that, Silver," he said. "This here loot'nent comes in the store, minding his own business and not botherin' nobody, and you and yore friends start tryin' to make a monkey of him, and then end up by threatening to kill his sojers. I don't blame him for gittin' mad." The storekeeper's voice grew stern. "And furthermore, I don't want my customers bothered and insulted by folks who jest loafs around and never buys nothin'. And that goes for you, Silver."

He ended by shaking his finger at the now crestfallen man. Silver growled something and looked around in vain for backing. His friends spat judicially and stared straight ahead.

"Reckon you didn't have no call to bother him, Silver," a tall, lean, cowpuncher said gravely. "Strikes me he done jest right in callin' you."

At that moment, old Terry the scout, quietly entered the store. The lieutenant looked at him in amazement.

"You mean to say Lowden left you behind, too!" Hawkins cried.

"Jest that, Loot'nent. And the worst of it is, he's takin' the long way around, the old Pilares trail—instead of cuttin' through the shortest way."

Hawkins' face grew tight and a worried frown creased his forehead. The storekeeper ostentatiously brought up a black bottle and two glasses.

"Here, Loot'nent, drink up and don't judge all of us by a few polecats. There's lots of good men both in and out the Army in this Territory."

"Who has ever contended otherwise?" asked Hawkins after he had downed the fiery drink. A sudden inspiration had flashed through his mind. He half turned to the group of civilians listening to Silver who was still expostulating in their midst.

"Of course the men of Arizona are all right," he said, in a slightly louder tone. "I claim the Territory has got the finest bunch of Americans in the world, both in and out of the Army—all Americans —and who can beat the Americans when they pull together?"

Heads were raised in the little group around Silver. Men edged nearer, some of them watching that bottle in interested fashion. Hawkins dropped one eyelid gravely at the storekeeper, nodding toward the glasses. More glasses were immediately forthcoming.

"I need a little help killing this bottle," said Hawkins. "Maybe I also need a little help on a bigger problem. How about it, Silver? There's no sense going around snarling at each other when all of us have got the same problem of keeping our scalps from being snatched by the Apaches."

CHAPTER III

Daring Venture

FOR a long minute the group of idlers stood motionless, staring at the bottle upon the counter. Slowly it seeped into their consciousnesses that the tall, lean, smiling officer was not unfriendly and that drinks were in prospect. They moved toward the counter, Silver among them, grinning sheepishly. Hawkins waved the bottle and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"Guess I talked too soon," Silver said, watching the amber liquid gurgle into a glass. Hawkins handed him the brimming glass. "Well, here's soap on yore saddle!" He downed his drink.

The lanky cowboy, who had sided with Hawkins after the argument, also emptied his glass and then cleared his throat appreciatively.

"You shore said a heap, Loot'nent, when you mentioned we want to hold on to our scalps," he said. "Them Apaches got pore old Hank Lewis and his wife down at Split Knob only yesterday. Tied 'em over an ant hill. Yep, we shore got to kill off Toribio's band of Injuns." Amiability now was fairly exuding from the group. The cowboy eyed Hawkins keenly. "What have you got on yore mind, Loot'nent?"

Hawkins looked slowly around the circle of faces. And then he began to speak. Gravely he told these men of the danger that confronted the cavalry detachment, of their limited numbers, and how easily it could be wiped out by the Apaches not to mention his own problem in remaining back at the camp with some five men, insufficient in any case to protect the camp or the town should the Apaches circle back.

He drew a word picture of the Apaches led by Toribio breaking into the town and what would happen, especially to the women and children—and then paused, while their minds worked and they glanced at each other questioningly.

Soon he took up the thread of his discourse again, touching upon the bond that held them all together—the bond of mutual danger. He reminded them of the greater bond of being Americans, recalled to them briefly the heroic civilians who had battled at the Alamo. He paused again to let the picture sink in.

It was when he saw their eyes glittering and their hands instinctively dropping to their revolver holsters that he rose to a climax.

"If Company K's detachment is massacred by Toribio's Apaches, who will protect the women and children here?" he asked, eyeing each man in turn. "As cowards we might all sit here and let K's detachment take its chances. If the detachment loses, we would be too few in numbers to hold off the Apaches. I am going to do my part to see that the detachment does not lose. I ride alone to help smash Toribio unless some of you elect to ride with me. Who will ride with me?" His voice rang out beneath the rafters of that adobe shed.

The response was instantaneous and overwhelming. Men leaped to their feet.

"Let's get goin'!" Silver said grimly.

The storekeeper broke out rifles and ammunition to those men who had none. Other men appeared out of the quick gathering darkness, swiftly caught the spirit of the undertaking and joined.

In twenty minutes Hawkins had his group assembled, and was galloping out of there, followed by a score of horsemen. None of them were trained cavalrymen but all were able to shoot and

ride—frontier Americans, capable of being the finest irregular cavalry in the world.

With old Terry, the scout, beside him, Hawkins led the column, at a steady mile-consuming gait down that trail which went by the shorter route to La Hacienda de la Fuente. . . .

WITH the high-pitched triumphant yell of the Apaches borne downwind to his ears, and just as the near mule dropped dead, Don Federico did not waste a second.

"To me!" he shouted to Isabel.

She rose and stood on the wagon seat, collected her skirts about her and leaped into his outstretched arms and so onto the saddle in front of him.

"Cut the dead mule loose with your machetes!" he shouted to the ranch hands.

They freed it from the entangling harness with four quick chopping strokes. The driver needed no explanations. He jumped to the back of the other mule and in a matter of seconds the now useless wagon was left behind, while the little group went pounding on along the trail.

The trail mounted toward a narrow cleft in the butte. When they reached it, Don Federico spoke again.

"I will drop off there, my dear," he said calmly in Spanish to his daughter. "This horse cannot carry double at this pace very long. Do thou ride on to the ranch and safety and it may be that I can hold them off until you summon help."

None of her entreaties were of any avail. When the narrow cleft had been entered, Don Federico drew his rifle from its case, shouted to the nearest ranch hand to throw him extra ammunition, and slid off, feet first at the gallop, landing like a cat on his feet. His daughter and his men would have pulled up, too, but he flailed them on by the power of his voice and the strength of command that was in him.

One of his men drew up, circled back and dropped an extra rifle and ammunition before following the others. Don Federico did not bear the resigned look of a man going to certain death. He was debonair and smiling as he carefully dropped to one knee, at the side of the great rock to the left of the road.

Because nightfall was descending fast, he drew careful bead on the foremost Apache horseman, now galloping up the slope before him. At the sharp crack of the rifle, the Apache toppled and dropped to the ground. When the next and the next Apache, each in turn fell, and the horse of the fourth rider collapsed under him, its heart punctured, the impetus of the charge was broken and those in the rear swung off that deadly hail.

Don Federico sighed. It was, as he knew, only a matter of a few minutes gained. But he had hoped, wistfully, that more Apaches would have fallen to his steady trigger before it grew too dark, and before that final darkness, which was inevitable, should descend upon him.

Even as he thought of these things, there came the rattle of a displaced pebble in the gathering dusk, and the shadowy outline of a yucca quivered as a shadow moved nearer. . . .

Hawkins, with the taciturn old scout Terry at his side, led his group of civilians at a steady pace as the night deepened. Due to circumstances having to do with a sentimental interest in Senorita Isabel, both Hawkins and his horse knew that trail well enough to move along it unhesitatingly.

From the men behind him came an occasional murmured word, but for the most part they rode in silence. These tough Southwesterners were under no illusions regarding the fighting qualities of the Chiricahua Apache. They were well acquainted with his deadly snakelike ability at striking from concealment and fighting to the death.

Hawkins himself was grave-faced and silent. He wondered if Isabel had succeeded in gaining the shelter of the hacienda or whether she might be dead, a victim of Apache savagery. He fought off this thought, desperately determined to keep his hopes high.

As he rode, the velvet black shadows of the desert began silently to flee before the lance shafts of the rising moon. Pools of silver in the highlights and purple ebony in the shadows. The desert stretched onward like an ocean, myster-

ious and alluring. To far horizons, its harsh seams and heavy wrinkles were smoothed by the soft touch of the moon. Its aged, sinister, old-world weariness was transformed into something ineffably youthful, poignant and wistful by the magic of that silver light.

Yet underneath that beauty, Death lay coiled and watchful. Any clump of mesquite, any pita-haya column, or grouped Spanish bayonet might conceal its beady-eyed Apache, ready to loose arrow or bullet. To Hawkins this only seemed to intensify the haunting beauty of the desert. But the moonlight also began to have its practical disadvantages.

Now they were nearing the Hacienda de la Fuente, coming to the edge of the valley that sheltered it, an edge over which the descending column would loom up prominently to the eye of any beholder. To obviate this, Hawkins sought and found a dry arroyo extending back into the upper plain and, with whispered admonitions, conducted the group, now dismounted and leading its horses, down into the valley.

THEY halted as the big ranchhouse of the Hacienda de la Fuente came into view, black and silent in the moonlight. No light showed. Nor was there sign of living thing in the valley before them.

"Looks too cussed peaceful to be true," he whispered to Terry.

The scout nodded in agreement, peering through the deceptive shadows with narrowed eyes. Both of these men had learned, by bitter experience, that the Apache is never so deadly as when he can neither be seen nor heard.

The logical thing to do was for one man to go through and get the lay of the land. Hawkins demanded that risky role, and finally won it, against the protests of Terry and the civilians. After giving some whispered instructions, he crept on foot down the draw and into the valley.

Here, soft paced, and as elusive as a ray of moonlight itself, he crept from yucca to mesquite bush, pausing to listen with every sense on the alert. It was well that this was so.

About halfway to the ranchhouse, Hawkins heard a stir of movement in a clump of Spanish bayonet he had picked for his next advance spot. He froze as the night air responded to a harsh, sharp sort of metallic rattle, vicious in its warning intensity. He crouched, motionless, until the rattling ceased.

A moment later, something slithered through the dust with a slow, flowing smoothness. Hawkins did not try to steal the rattlesnake's berth to that spot, he got out of the way, circling around and coming up at the rear of the house.

There was a dry stream bed, in back, that he knew, and up its circuitous windings he toiled, troubled in his mind. To his thinking, somehow the matter seemed too easy and his acute senses warned him of a trap. But there was only one way to go and that was forward.

The side of the house was sheltered by some cottonwood trees and Hawkins made his way to these. Above him was the window of Isabel's room, heavily shuttered and dark. With his heart beating with sudden dread, he flung some pebbles at the shutters and waited, tense. After what seemed an eternity of time he saw the shutter begin to move outward and stepped back just in case an enemy rifle barrel should suddenly be thrust through.

But instead, a voice—to him the loveliest in the world—fell upon his ears.

"Why deed you come, Hawkeens?" Isabel's agitated whisper reproached him.

Before he had a chance to answer, the shutter closed again and he crept, silent-footed to the small, oaken door, set deeply in the thick adobe walls. He watched it open cautiously, and then froze, immobile.

His quick eye had caught a shadowy movement at the far corner of the building, and four or five furtive shapes crept into view—crouching shadows of small Apache warriors. Cautiously, he backed through the open door and into the arms of an eager and impetuous girl.

"Why, oh, why deed you come, Hawkeens?" she asked again breathlessly, her voice throbbing with fear. He quietly closed and bolted the door.

Turning, Hawkins laid his finger against her lips. She froze into silence

as they listened. Cautious hands were trying the door. The girl and man scarcely breathed. They heard a mutter of words from outside which died away.

Quietly he drew her back from the door into the dark passage, only then pressing her to him, to find that her face was covered with tears. In whispers she told him how the Apaches had tried to encircle them, how they had shot the mule. She went on to explain how her father had remained behind to fight off the enemy, thereby sacrificing his life for her, and her father's men had been killed as they were picked off, one by one, by the Indians. Then how she, light in weight and mounted on the fastest horse, had galloped alone to the hacienda, finding it deserted.

Hawkins listened silently. He comforted her as best he could and did some rapid thinking. Undoubtedly Toribio's gang had surrounded the place. It was only by the utmost care that Hawkins had crept through them unscathed. To try and return the way he had come, with Isabel, would be to take her into certain death. At that moment they heard a pounding on the main door on the far side of the house.

"Let's see what this is all about!" he whispered and followed her as she led the way up the narrow stairs and around to the room above the main door.

Peering through the shutters he saw a group of some ten Apaches below. In front of them were two men. Hawkins drew in his breath sharply, and turned.

"Your father still lives," he told her, quietly. "Perhaps you had better speak to the man below. It is Toribio himself, I think I had better keep out of sight."

The girl uttered a startled gasp. But she soon steadied down and went quietly to the window, partially opening the heavy shutter.

"Padre mio!" she breathed, her hand at her heart.

HAWKINS peered through the shutters and saw that Don Federico's hands were bound behind him. But the old Don's voice came up from below, clear and strong and imperative.

"Pay no heed to this dog, my dear. He will kill me in any case—"

Toribio struck the bound Don Federico brutally across the mouth and tilted his head toward the window above him.

"It is not true that I will kill him," said Toribio. "I will trade his life for the hand of his beautiful daughter, now, and without trickery. What is your word, Senorita?"

Isabel moaned and stepped back from the window.

"Tell him to give you a few minutes to consider his offer," Hawkins whispered. "Tell him you must dress, first. Gain time at any cost."

Hawkins' mind was in a turmoil. The Apaches undoubtedly outnumbered his little group of civilians by two to one, at least. They also had the advantage of position.

To attack them would mean that they would probably kill not only Don Federico but also his daughter. If he could only get his men inside the hacienda, quickly. There was a faint chance this could be done.

Again Isabel held a parley with Toribio and returned to Hawkins' side.

"He will give me until the moon sinks below the mesa rim," she reported.

Hawkins glanced at the moon—fifteen minutes, perhaps twenty, with luck. He would have to move fast. Briefly he explained his plan.

She clung to him hopelessly, fearing for his life. Then, like a sensible girl, she dried her tears and followed him to that little window of her room.

He opened the shutter and looked down. There was no sign of life on this side of the house. After directing her to leave the window shutter unbarred, he quickly pressed her to him and as quickly was out the window, hanging by his hands.

Silently he dropped to the ground below and disappeared amid the shadows of the cottonwoods. Treading as cautiously as a cat, he made his way to the dried stream bed and let himself down below its banks. A pebble falling near at hand, transfixed him into immobility.

Suddenly something black and soft descended upon him. He struggled against it but wriggling, sinewy, forms clung to his arms and legs. The blanket grew suffocating. A blow at the side of his head dazed him and he stumbled and fell. Then, amidst a great roaring noise

in his ears came the flare of many lights. These faded into darkness, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER IV

Just in Time

A SICKLE shaped moon in its black velvet setting of star studded sky, had risen above the rim of the desert, when Lieutenant Lowden, marching by the longer route, halted his cavalrymen. His advance guard of four men had ridden up to report that they had sighted the Hacienda de la Fuente a good half mile away. There seemed to be some movement there but the place was dark and they could not tell for certain.

"The enemy is undoubtedly before us, in force," the pudgy first lieutenant said.

After due deliberation and much striding back and forth with his hands behind him, he summoned his non-commissioned officers.

"You will dismount and circle with your led horses by platoons," he commanded. "Sergeant Heintz will take the first platoon and attack the enemy's right flank, supported by Sergeant O'Hara with the second platoon. I will maintain under my hand the third platoon, as a reserve. Battles, you will remember, are won by the side heaviest with reserves." He misquoted Napoleon Bonaparte somewhat on this but no one knew the difference, and anyway, it didn't matter much.

Silence greeted his words.

Sergeant Heintz at last broke it. "What does the lieutenant want us to do?" he asked.

"To surround and capture the enemy, especially the person of one José Toribio, the renegade," said First Lieutenant Lowden.

"Yes, sir." Sergeant Heintz saluted and led his men into the darkness of the valley, mumbling to himself.

"To leave only one man wit' the led horses is plenty bad business, all the same," he remarked to no one in particular. Close on his heels came Sergeant O'Hara and his ten or eleven men.

At the last, Lieutenant Lowden moved the third platoon forward dismounted, his men looking wistfully at the clump of led-horses, a single man holding the bridle reins.

"I ain't hankerin' for a long walk back to camp," O'Hara murmured. "That's a perfect lay-out to have our horses lifted."

"Silence in the ranks!" ordered Lowden.

The pudgy lieutenant halted his platoon after a minute or two, listening in the darkness for the first sound of battle.

All was quiet near the hacienda. Not a sound disturbed the intense stillness which pervaded the valley. Nothing could be heard save the slight noise made by the pudgy little lieutenant as he strode back and forth before his men, his hands behind his back, his head sunk on his chest in deep thought.

Ten minutes stretched into fifteen, and fifteen into twenty, before Lowden began to feel a little worried. Then a messenger came through from the front.

"Sergeant Heintz says there ain't a soul stirring anywhere around the outside of the house and he don't want to attack the house for fear there may be a trap. He wants to know what to do."

Lowden scratched his bullet-shaped head. "H'm! I see. Stand by, my man, until I decide."

But as so often happens in warfare, the decision was not left to Lieutenant Lowden.

There came the sound of scuffling from behind, where the led horses were being held, a sudden shout, a flurry of movement and the sound of galloping hoofs fading into the distance.

It was Parsen, a gangling recruit, who came running up.

"A gang of Apaches jumped me," he panted. "They got away with all the horses of my platoon."

Clearly here was the time to do something but First Lieutenant Lowden did not believe in rash action.

"You say they got all the horses?" he asked. "Of which platoon?"

"The second platoon, sir," was the reply.

"H'm, I see."

There was another scuffling sound from the rear and another shout. Lowden turned to give orders to his men at last and stared in amazement. For his men had all disappeared! His platoon had just faded into the darkness, impelled by a natural desire to save their own horses while there was yet time.

LOWDEN pursed his lips firmly and strode away into the night after them. Once he had found them, their own horses safe, he remembered suddenly that the great Napoleon advised strongly against a division of forces, so he sent out runners to bring in the orphan platoons of Sergeant Heintz and Sergeant O'Hara from the position a few hundred yards from the ranchhouse. In due time, the two platoons returned, Sergeant Heintz cursing fluently.

"This is a fine state of affairs," Heintz muttered under his breath to O'Hara. "From what they tell me, we've already lost the horses of the second platoon. And down at the ranchhouse, there's strange goin's-on. O'Hara, my boy, I saw a light inside—a faint flicker through the crack under the main door. I wish Loot'nent Hawkins was here. He'd settle all this foolishment in jig time."

At just about the same moment, Sergeant Heintz was talking with Sergeant O'Hara, Lieutenant Hawkins also was seeing that same light. For he was being half-dragged, half-carried by his captors around to the front of the ranchhouse, and thrown to the ground, where with sickening waves of returning consciousness he came to and strove to sit up.

The moon was already down. A small fire gleamed on his aching eyeballs. Clearing his head, he felt for his revolver. It was gone. A knife point pressed against the back of his neck and he grew still, glancing at the leather leggins of the Apache who stood over him. That bit of firelight intrigued him and he strove to focus his eyes upon it.

He swore under his breath. For the firelight was a torch being applied to the bare feet of Don Federico. Toribio superintended the torture, glancing up at the window above the main door, where Isabel stood wringing her hands in horror.

Before Hawkins could say a word, she threw out her hand.

"Stop—stop!" she called out in broken tones. "I will open the door!" She had left the window before Hawkins could gather words to warn her.

The door came open. Don Federico was dragged to his feet and pushed and shoved forward. Toribio flung a word over his shoulder at the Apache behind Hawkins and he, in turn, was roughly dragged to his feet by several evil smelling Chiricahuas, and shoved along, the knife at his back.

Both he and Don Federico were pushed through the doorway into an open court with a gallery above, surrounding it. Hawkins glanced up there sick at heart, then turned. Near him knelt Isabel, examining her father's wounds.

Toribio dragged her to her feet.

"Well, well, my little pigeon!" The renegade spoke with suppressed fury. "Poor little old Toribio, who was not good enough to marry a daughter of the de la Fuentes, is now master of their lives and destinies."

Isabel gazed at him fearlessly. "You are a dog and always have been and always will be one," she said.

Toribio's face darkened. "For that you will have the pleasure of seeing your father and this so handsome Americano officer have their throats cut!" he announced. His expression changed into one of deviltry. "You shall have the privilege of saying which shall go first! Speak—which shall it be?"

Isabel's face blanched with horror. She took a step backward. Her composure broke.

"No, no, I beg you, spare them!" She strangled a sob.

The quiet voice of Don Federico came from the shadows.

"The matter is easily decided," he said gravely, and turning bowed ceremoniously from the waist, to Hawkins. "Age and dignity has precedence over youth. I claim the honor of being the first."

"So be it!" said Toribio. He nodded to the Chiricahua brave who stood with

poised knife, his cruel eyes glittering. The brave reached out and grasped the Don's long gray hair, pulling his head back to bare his throat for the fatal stroke.

HAWKINS reared up from the floor. With a single backward sweep of his fist he knocked down the Apache who guarded him.

"Stop, fool!" he thundered in Apache at the Chiricahua who was holding the knife at Don Federico's throat. His words startled the Indian who stared, open mouthed.

"You, Toribio, look well what you do!" continued Hawkins. He was using Spanish now and shaking his clenched fist at the startled renegade. "Be careful!" He advanced toward the renegade. "You, who are about to die, can see your fate awaiting you!"

With that, he pointed dramatically into the darkness of a tunneled passage which led from the patio into the interior of the house.

That second's flicker of Toribio's eyes toward the danger spot was Hawkins' chance. He leaped upon the renegade, smashed him down with one swift blow to the jaw and, as the man fell, jerked out from Toribio's holster that ivory and gold handled revolver, his own. Leaping closer, he swiftly dashed its butt down upon the head of the Chiricahua executioner.

So swiftly was it done that all the men stood dazed for an instant. In that space of time Hawkins shot a swift look up at the gallery above and uttered a great shout.

"Throw down your arms, you dogs!" he roared and pointed upward where the rifles of Terry, the old scout, and a dozen or more of the civilian riders, with a sprinkling of soldiers, were protruding over the edge of the balcony.

He was almost breathless with relief. The civilians had carried out the instructions which he had whispered before he left them. They had followed after him when the moon had sunk below the horizon, entering the ranchhouse by that small window in Isabel's room which he had left unfastened.

The civilians swarmed down now, from the balcony under the guns of Terry and a handful who covered them. Swiftly they tied up Toribio and his Chiricahuas. Don Federico, despite the pain of his scorched feet, rose courteously as befitted a Mexican host.

"My house is yours," he said to his rescuers. "And I believe there is enough food left for a feast."

Toribio, his eyes murderous, was dragged out with his followers. Terry followed, his face grim, and after him stalked a few of the civilians. Hawkins, sensing their plan, started to object, then thought better of it. After all, the instructions were to bring in Toribio dead or alive, and those brutes were better off dead.

As Terry said afterwards, severed heads required less horseflesh to carry them, than live bodies, even if the civilians had captured all the Apache ponies and recaptured the horses of the second platoon.

Isabel, between laughing and crying, hurried to marshall the servants who had crept back. They began to prepare a feast. In passing, her hand lightly brushed over Hawkins' thick mop of hair.

"God is very good to us, *mi corazon*," she said simply and was gone, jingling the keys to the stores.

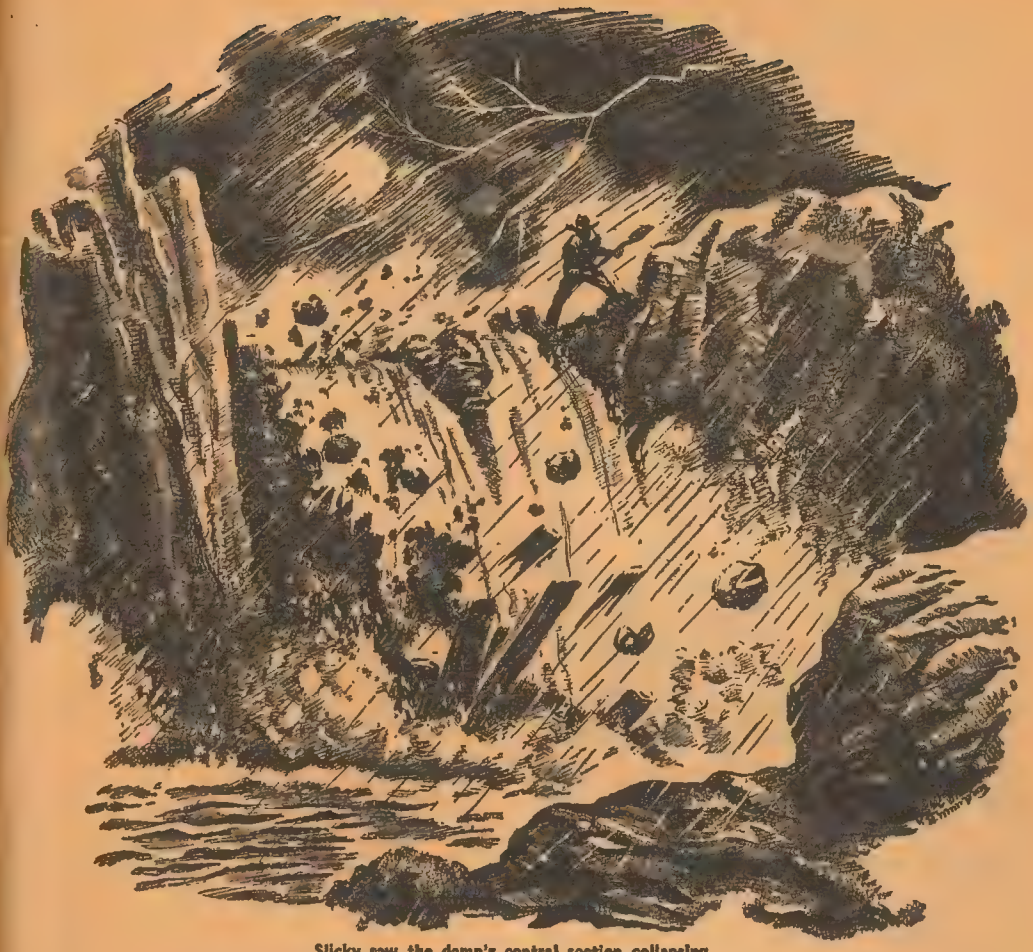
First Lieutenant Lowden was inclined to be stiff about the affair, but when Hawkins, earnest and convincing, explained just how the entire matter redounded enormously to the credit of the pudgy lieutenant, Lowden warmed up. He even promised that he would remember Hawkins' good work with a commendation in despatches.

First Sergeant Heintz was slightly gloomy about the general situation.

"You see, Sergeant Heintz!" explained Lieutenant Lowden. "Battles are won by the leader who concentrates superior force at the desired point. Nobody can dispute that my capture of the notorious renegade Toribio is a very clear illustration of that great axiom."

"Sure, Lieut'nant," agreed Heintz. "All battles are won by the feller who does the least beating about the bush. Sure!"

But he glanced over to where Hawkins was rapt in conversation with Isabel as he said it.



Slicky saw the damn's central section collapsing

A Mansion for Maybelle

By L. ERNENWEIN

When Slicky of Broken Bow buys a map to find a treasure, it almost costs him his friends, the girl he loves—and his life!

ALGERNON SLATER, better known to Dragoon Basin folks as "Slicky" Slater the Tucson drummer, halted his bay pacer in Stagecoach Canyon and studied the map spread out on the seat beside him. The large, age-faded paper, which bore numerous symbols of trees, hills, canyons and a stagecoach, was supposed to be a genuine "derrotero"—a cryptic and exclusive guide to the location of a fabulous fortune called the Oro Kid Cache.

A smile of eager anticipation wreathed Slater's cherubic face, and excitement shone bright in his brown eyes as he compared his surroundings with

the crude symbols.

"This is the place!" he exclaimed. "Those bandits buried their gold somewhere between here and Broken Bow!"

It occurred to Slicky now that the search would take a lot of looking, and a tremendous amount of digging along five or six miles of the canyon. But even so Slicky was exuberant. All he had to do was show the map to a few good friends in Broken Bow, invite them to join the hunt on shares, and the treasure would be theirs.

"Thousands and thousands of dollars in gold eagles," Slicky mused, carefully rolling the ancient paper. "Enough so I can build a big house on Residential Avenue and make Maybelle the social queen of Broken Bow."

All of his life Slicky Slater had dreamed of winning the jackpot—of acquiring fame and fortune on one glorious stroke of luck. Even as a small boy he'd invariably risked his best marbles shooting for aggies, and for the past six years he had gambled his earnings on enterprises ranging from grubstakes for bonanza-bound prospectors to building a bridge across Calamity Canyon.

But the grubstaked fortune hunters had never found gold and the bridge had collapsed of its own weight. So Slicky continued his weary rounds of mining camp and cowtown as a construction supply salesman while Maybelle Mitchell waited patiently in Broken Bow.

SLICKY was thinking about Maybelle now as he drove down Stagecoach Canyon in his red-wheeled rig. It would certainly be nice to see her again after all these weeks, especially good now that he was in the way of becoming a rich man. Fonso Mitchell, who'd refused to let his daughter marry a "homeless, fiddle-footed drummer," would be glad to welcome a wealthy son-in-law.

"No more lonely drummer trips for us," Slicky said to his bay pacer. "I'll be a solid citizen of Broken Bow and you'll be a town horse from now on."

Anticipation was like a warm wave rolling inside Slater when he drove across the ford where Soto River's shallow water veered away from the stage road. Just thinking about the map made his pulse beat faster. He had paid a hundred dollars for the derrotero, purchasing it from an old Mexican who claimed his departed cousin had been a member of the Oro Kid's gang.

"The dinero ees some place south of Broken Bow," the Mexican had said, and sighed wearily. "Ees long deestance for old hombre to look-see. *Mucho trabajo.*"

"Much work," Slater mused, recalling how quickly he had deciphered the map's markings. That big canyon with the stagecoach depicted above it had been the tipoff. It was like a bolt from the blue and it meant just one thing to Slicky: Stagecoach Canyon!

The old Mexican hadn't been smart enough to figure it out, hadn't put the stagecoach and the canyon together. But Slicky had recognized the combination almost instantly. Remembering how his Broken Bow acquaintances had hoorawed him in the past when grand schemes failed to function, Slater chuckled cheerfully. They'd sing a different tune once they saw the derrotero. They'd slap him on the back and want in on the fortune hunt.

Happily, as a man making up a list of friends for presents at Christmastime, Slater chose the men he would allow in on the secret: "Dude" Mulqueen, Doc Plunkett, Shaemus O'Shea, Sheriff Odegarde, Lee Sing and "Close-Shave" Pelky. Those were his good friends. Fonso Mitchell, cranky owner of the mercantile, would be on the list only because of Maybelle.

"That'll make eight of us," Slicky calculated, "which means there'll be better than ten thousand apiece."

Slater was thinking about that as he drove into Mulqueen's wagonyard and saw Dude sitting forlornly on the doorway bench.

"What you looking so downhearted about?" Slicky inquired.

"The railroad boom is over," Mulqueen muttered. "They've moved their construction camp to Calico Creek and I'm stuck with twenty teams nobody wants."

Afterward, when he had put up the bay pacer, Dude explained his dire trouble.

"I figgered the dad-ratted railroad would need more horses to pull their

fresnoes and such by the time they got here," Dude said. "So I mortgaged my stable to buy up a big bunch of teams. But the construction boss happened to be a mule lover, and imported them long-eared bray brutes from the east."

"Don't let it worry you," Slater answered him confidently. "I've got a deal that'll pay off your mortgage and leave you with cash money besides."

"Not me," Dude muttered, shrugging. "I donated to your bridge buildin' scheme to the tune of three hundred dollars, which would sure come in handy now."

"But this is different," Slicky insisted, and showed Dude the derrotero. "There'll be no need for money investment—just pick and shovel work by eight lucky men."

"I'm too weak from worryin' to do any diggin'," Mulqueen declared morosely, shaking his head. "It'd take more than prospect holes in Stagecoach Canyon to keep Banker Packard from takin' over my stable on the mortgage I owe him."

Although this turn-down surprised Slicky, it didn't dampen his enthusiasm. Dude, he decided, was too discouraged to recognize a good thing when he saw it. But, presently, when he stood at the Alhambra Saloon bar and watched Shaemus O'Shea shake his bald head, Slicky began to wonder.

"No, begorrah," O'Shea declared. "I'll not be invistin' money or muscles in no wild goose chase like this. Ye have fine dreams, Slicky, and it's in me heart to wish ye well with thim, but I'm too old a man for chasin' rainbows."

IT WAS the same at Lee Sing's Oriental Cafe. The Chinese proprietor was smilingly respectful, as always, but he failed to register the slightest enthusiasm. Nor did Close-Shavey Pelky, the barber, nor Sheriff Odegarde.

Even Doc Plunkett, the parable-spouting old medico who could usually be depended upon to grow eloquently enthused over anything pertaining to Broken Bow's betterment, failed to function after hearing Slicky's scheme.

"You're a high-class salesman," Doc Parable Plunkett proclaimed, "but even a genius of psychological wizardry wouldn't be able to sell so fantastic a scheme to a drunken halfwit. It is my considered opinion that you've been bamboozled out of one hundred dollars. That foxy old Mexican probably has a hundred cousins and a dozen derroteros for each cousin. Instead of wasting your time and talent on such foolery you should be devising some method of coping with Fonso Mitchell who's threatening to club you out of town with a pick handle."

"Why?" Slicky demanded.

The pompous old medico took time to flick a spot of dust from the frayed sleeve of his Prince Albert coat. Then he nodded toward the bank, where stylishly-garbed Fred Packard stood talking to a Fandango Hills rancher.

"It is a rather complex matter, Slicky," he said slyly. "It involves many ingredients, including our new banker."

"What in tunket has Packard got to do with Fonso chasing me out of town with a pick handle?" Slater demanded impatiently.

There were times when Parable Plunkett could be exasperating, and this was one of them.

He said, "It also involves your high powered enthusiasm, which has always been your chief failing."

That was too much for Slicky. Even though he had a high regard for Doc's vocabulary and enjoyed listening to it upon occasion, this wasn't the time for jaw-wagging conversation. If something was wrong at Mitchell's Mercantile he wanted to know it right now—and find out how it affected his long courtship of Maybelle.

So thinking, Slicky Slater got up from the Mansion House veranda bench and was on the point of leaving, when Plunkett chided him.

"Haste makes waste, my limber-legged young friend," Plunkett said. "Far better to take time for proper reflection before colliding with a girl's angry father." Then he asked: "Do you recall the day you talked Fonso into stocking a vast supply of construction tools, dynamite, fresnoes and harness?"

Slicky Slater nodded.

"You sold Fonso on the proposition that railroad builders would need to replenish their equipment when they

reached Dragoon Basin," Doc reminded.

"Well, didn't they?" Slicky asked.

"Not so much as a single shovel, nor a pickaxe, nor a set of harness," Plunkett reported profoundly. "That, my slick-tongued young friend, means that Fonso has more construction stock at the Mercantile than this country could possibly use in a hundred years."

"Gosh!" Slicky exclaimed, and shivered at thought of the blistering denunciation Maybelle's father would give him.

"Can't you talk your company into taking the stuff back?" Plunkett inquired.

"I quit my job soon as I bought the derrotero," Slicky muttered, shaking his head. "But even if I hadn't, there'd be no chance of returning all that stock. Prices took a considerable drop last week."

"Then you'd better dream up a scheme that'll call for a big construction job in Broken Bow," Doc suggested. "Or else say good-bye to Maybelle Mitchell."

FOR a long moment Slicky just stood and peered at Mitchell's Mercantile in frowning silence. Less than an hour ago he'd been eager to arrive there—anxious to tell his big news about the map he possessed. But now it was the last place he wanted to go. None of his friends would help him search for the Oro Kid's Cache, and it'd take months, perhaps years, for one man to prospect the canyon.

Then, as Fred Packard passed the hotel, Slicky remembered Plunkett's sly talk about the banker being involved in this deal.

"What," he inquired, "has Packard got to do with my trouble?"

"A very minor part," Doc assured. "Merely the fact that Fred has been a frequent caller at the Mitchell domicile lately. He seems to have become smitten by Maybelle's womanly charms."

"What could she see in such a stuffed-shirt galoot?" Slicky scoffed. "They say Packard hasn't so much as smiled in the six months he's been here."

"A sober citizen, I'll grant," Plunkett said sagely. "But a solid citizen, Slicky—very solid and substantial, financially speaking."

Which was another thing Slater worried about as he walked slowly toward Mitchell's Mercantile.

It wasn't far, not more than a hundred yards or so. But Slicky Slater thought of many things in the time it took him to walk that short distance. He remembered the first time he had come to Broken Bow six years ago, never guessing he'd meet Maybelle Mitchell. Late in the afternoon, it had been, with her standing on the Mercantile steps. The sight of her had fairly taken his breath away, she was that beautiful.

Slicky sighed, recalling how sunlight had burnished her auburn hair and given her face a peachbloom loveliness. He'd just turned twenty-one then, and she was nineteen. It had been love at first sight for both of them. Afterward, when Fonso Mitchell had refused even so much as to discuss the possibility of his daughter marrying a drummer, Slicky had tried to talk Maybelle into eloping. But she was a proud and proper girl and refused to disobey her father's wishes.

Now, as Slicky stepped up to the Mercantile stoop, the familiar smell of vinegar and coal oil and fresh-ground coffee reminded him that he wasn't even a drummer—and that this might well be the last time he'd enter this place.

The store was deserted, but conversation came from Fonso Mitchell's office at the rear. Walking slowly between the long counters piled high with merchandise, Slicky heard Banker Packard's precise voice.

"The logs could be shipped to Tucson at a nice profit soon as the railroad is completed," the banker was saying. "If you will act as broker, I'll finance the business on a fifty-fifty basis."

Slicky stopped near the open doorway and waited, not wanting to interrupt the conversation.

"But would there be enough logs to make it worthwhile?" he heard Mitchell mutter.

"I believe so," Packard said. "Jud Peel tells me there's a good stand of timber on almost every ranch in the Fandango Hills. He says the cowmen would haul logs to town between roundups, summer and winter."

Which was when Fonso Mitchell

glanced out and saw Slicky.

"So you finally came back!" the merchant exclaimed, a deep scowl rutting his heavy-jowled face. He pointed to a huge stack of picks and shovels that covered one whole corner of the store. "Look at them!" he shouted. "Five hundred dollars worth of tools I can't sell, in addition to a thousand dollars in dynamite, fresnoes and harness that's cluttering up my warehouse. And you said I'd sell it all to the railroad in one week's time!"

SLICKY felt weak in the knees. For once he could think of nothing to say—nothing that might banish the accusing glare in Mitchell's rage-flared eyes. This, he thought dismally, was the end of his long-cherished dream of marrying Maybelle.

"Why don't you say something?" Mitchell demanded. "Why don't you think up one of your slick schemes so I can sell all that useless stock?"

Then Fred Packard loosed a taunting snicker and said slyly, "Too bad you didn't dream up the log brokerage deal I just suggested to Fonso. It wouldn't dispose of the construction tools, but it might make up for the loss."

Until this moment Slicky hadn't even considered thinking up a deal that might dispose of those picks and shovels. But now, without the slightest idea of how it could be accomplished, he looked Mitchell in the eye and made a promise.

"I'll dispose of that stock so you won't take a loss."

"How?" the merchant demanded.

"How?" Packard echoed.

Slicky forced a confidential smile. "A business deal," he countered, and tried to make his voice sound enthusiastic. "A new and profitable business for Broken Bow."

"A gold mine, perhaps," Packard suggested scoffingly. "Or a collapsible bridge across Soto River."

And Fonso Mitchell growled, "Don't you dare to so much as speak to my daughter until that construction stuff is out of this store. Do you understand me, Slater?"

Slicky nodded, and walking from the mercantile, wondered how anything but a railroad building job could absorb all those picks and shovels.

He was still wondering the same thing after supper when he sat with Parable Plunkett on the hotel veranda. Doc was in a talkative mood as usual, discussing the merits of Packard's log-brokerage business.

"That will mean some extra money for the ranchers," Plunkett said. "Too bad they don't need Fonso's surplus stock to produce those logs." Then the old medico exclaimed: "By Jove—I've got it!"

"Got what?" Slicky asked.

"A scheme that'll relieve Mitchell of that construction material. It's colossal, Slicky—absolutely colossal. And so magnificent in scope it will take your breath away!"

"What is it?" Slicky demanded.

"A sawmill."

That didn't make sense to Slater. He shrugged, "It wouldn't take many picks and shovels to build a sawmill," he said.

"But what makes a sawmill run?" Parable asked smilingly.

"Why, water, of course."

"Controlled water," Parable corrected. "And what controls water?"

"A dam," Slicky said.

"Precisely."

Then it dawned on Slicky Slater. A dam across Soto River!

It would take hundreds of picks and shovels to build a dam in Stagecoach Canyon. It would take dynamite and fresnoes, and harness for the teams that would pull the fresnoes.

"All you've got to do is promote it," Plunkett proclaimed. "With your great gift of salesmanship there'll be no trouble forming a pool to produce the required capital in one day's time. Every cowman with timber on his land will want to invest. Fonso Mitchell will back your promotion so that he can unload those tools, and Dude Mulqueen will do the same, wanting to hire out all those horses he's been feeding so long."

"Gosh," Slicky mused, a wistful smile creasing his chubby face.

"Once the pool is organized even Banker Packard will be glad to lend whatever extra money is needed to put the thing over," Parable declared. "It'll be a gold mine, Slicky—a veritable gold mine!"

"And I'll be able to build that mansion for Maybelle," Slicky said in a whispering, dream-filled voice.

FOR the first time in his life, Slicky Slater had a thing to sell that people really wanted. Contacting the same friends who'd turned down the Oro Kid scheme, he found them eager to invest their savings in his sawmill proposition. Within one day's time the company was formed—an eight-man company with Slicky Slater as president. In another three days, during which Slicky drove his red-wheeled rig from ranch to ranch in the Fandango Hills, enough shares were sold to finance a twenty-thousand-dollar project, even though most of the subscribers had to mortgage their homes to raise the cash.

Only Fred Packard voiced objection to the plan. Declaring that it would take at least forty thousand dollars to build an adequate dam across Stagecoach Canyon, the banker stubbornly refused to invest a dollar of his own money. But even though he predicted disaster the first time a flash flood hit the dam, Packard filled all requests for loans on mortgages.

With every available man in Dragoon Basin employed at day wages, the project was well under way within a week. Slicky Slater, who had contracted for all Mitchell's surplus stock as his first official act, spent his days directing construction of the dam and his evenings in the Mitchell parlor listening to Maybelle play his favorite tunes on the piano.

Life had never seemed so good to Slicky, so filled with soul-satisfying work and social pleasure. Week after week of it, while the dam rose higher and higher, while a wide diversion canal was dug to the sawmill site and men made a game of guessing the exact day the dam would be completed.

Then, with the work almost done, a great bank of thunderheads rolled in from the north. They hovered like huge billows of doom above the Fandango Hills for a day and a night, and another day.

Apprehension swept through Broken Bow. This was early summer—time of thunderstorms and cloudbursts. Banker Packard voiced the town's unspoken fear, proclaiming that Slicky Slater had miscalculated the size of dam needed—that his frugality would result in disaster when the big rains came. But even though Slicky had the same secret fear, he brazened it out, declaring that his construction calculations were correct. And crossing his fingers when he said it.

Anxiously watching the thunderheads, Slicky urged his crews to greater effort—worked them at night in the weird illumination of pitch flares and bonfires.

"We've got to get it finished before the storm breaks," he told them. "We've got to!"

And after the crews had finally quit that evening, Slicky remained at the dam, measuring the day's progress. Another foot, he believed, would bring it above the danger mark.

"Another day's work," he muttered, trudging wearily toward the construction shack. "Two, at most."

Then, with thundering, lightning-flashed abruptness, the storm broke.

DURING a breathless moment, while slanting sheets of rain swept into the canyon, Slicky stood spellbound by the savage intensity of the storm. Thunder rumbled down the canyon in bucketing billows of tremendous sound. Lightning bloomed in weird bouquets, slashed the darkness with bursts of dazzling brilliance that darted and crackled and crossed the canyon in zigzagging flares of fantastic design.

Slicky ignored the rain that drenched him—that sogged his clothes with cold wetness. This, he knew, was a cloudburst. And knew also that a flash flood would certainly follow it.

Slicky peered at the lightning-flared dam, thought of all it stood for—if it stood. Twenty thousand dollars in wages and material, prosperity for Dragoon Basin—a mansion for Maybelle on Residential Avenue. But if it went down . . .

Slicky shuddered to think of what that would mean. Honest, toil-worn men would lose their homes. Instead of reaping the prosperity a sawmill would bring, his Broken Bow friends would be ruined. And Banker Packard, who'd risked no money of his own, would win a fortune in foreclosed mortgages.

Then, as his rain-squinted eyes watched the dam in a hypnotic stare, Slicky saw the low barricade that separated the dam proper from the diversion canal. If that barricade could be removed, the full force of the flood might be diminished enough to save the dam. But could it be done in time?

Even as he raced to the construction shack for a shovel, Slicky sensed that the barricade couldn't be removed fast enough. Not by one man. But because it was the only possible chance of saving the dam, Slicky rushed to the canal barricade and put his whole heart and soul into frenzied, feverish digging. And as he dug he listened for the roar of rushing water—the awful roar that would merge with the thunder's continuous cannonading.

He was like a lost soul working against impending doom, there on the lightning-flared barricade. Working as he'd never worked before, hoisting rain-sogged earth shovelful by shovelful until his blistered hands were twin agonies—until the muscles in his arms seemed to dissolve into useless rags of aching flesh.

"Just another few minutes," he panted, while rain spattered his shoulders in a solid sheet of water.

And then, as if in mocking echo, came the awful roar of rushing water—the grinding, gouging surge of a flash-flood hurtling down Stagecoach Canyon.

Dazedly, as a man shocked by a paralyzing blow, Slicky stumbled from the barricade. He was remotely aware of water flowing about his knees, of hearing it smash against the dam with an impact that sent a huge cascade of spray across the canyon. For one fleeting instant, as water rose to his waist, Slicky thought the dam was going to hold. But in the next moment he had a glimpse of the dam's central section collapsing—saw tons of high-piled earth dissolve into muddy, surging water.

ALGERNON SLATER, who'd once been affectionately called Sickly Slater by his friends in Broken Bow, halted his bay pacer on the muddy road up Stagecoach Canyon. Folks weren't calling him "Slicky" today. They were calling him a stupid dreamer whose sawmill scheme had ruined Dragoon Basin.

Slicky winced, remembering how happily Banker Packard had said, "I told you so!"

And how Fonso Mitchell had refused to let him say good-by to Maybelle.

"She's silly enough to still have faith in you," the old merchant delcared. "The girl must be daft."

That was the worst part of it. Even worse than all the money that had been swallowed up by the flood. Maybelle had believed in him. She'd been so sure of his success that she had drawn the plans for their home—for the grand mansion they would share together.

Slicky shrugged dejectedly. He heard a rig's wheels clatter across stones at the ford below, but paid no attention to it. Nothing mattered now, except to get away from those accusing eyes in Broken Bow—away from sight and sound of all the fine folks who'd lost their homes on mortgages they'd never been able to pay.

The sun was shining now, but there was no brightness in it for Slicky Slater. No warmth. He didn't see the sunshine. All he saw was a flood-ravished canyon strewn with the muddy wreckage of a twenty-thousand-dollar dream. Water had gouged a deep gorge from the diversion canal to the riverbed. Slicky was peering morosely at this mute evidence of the flood's ferocity when he noticed something that sparkled against the mud's darkness, something with a yellow glint—like gold!

Which was when Slicky abruptly remembered the derrotero in his pocket.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed.

Jumping from the rig, Slicky rushed toward the muddy gorge. "It might be it," he said hopefully.

And in the next moment, as he saw double-eagles glinting from bursted canvas sacks, he yelled, "The Oro Kid Cache!"

He was down on his knees, scooping mud away from the rotted canvas of sprawled sacks of goldpieces when Maybelle Mitchelle called, "Slicky!"

Then he saw her, leaning from a livery rig with sunlight burnishing her auburn hair and giving her face a peach-

(Concluded on page 113)

RAWHIDE REVENGE

By GUNNISON STEELE

The tricky drygulcher who killed Greenriver Abbot reckoned that Sheriff Johnny Turk would serve to provide a good alibi for him!

LANKY, REDHAIRED Sheriff Johnny Turk, was working over some legal documents in his office in Broken Bow. He glanced out a window and saw Luke Ivor riding along the street. Johnny frowned, glancing at his watch. He was reminded that it was past his eating time. It was exactly twelve-thirty.

Still frowning, his gaze followed the rider as he stopped and dismounted before a saloon. Ivor was a blocky, dark-faced man whom few people liked. His little outfit on upper Bucktail Creek was run-down and almost worthless, yet Ivor was riding a high-stepping black gelding that glittered with silver trappings. He was wearing an expensive cream-colored hat, green silk shirt, foxed breeches and alligator-skin boots.

Johnny Turk turned back to his work, deciding to finish it before eating. Exactly an hour later he snapped shut his old roll-top desk—looked up and saw a second rider come along the street and angle in toward the tie-bar in front of his office.

This rider, mounted on a hammer-headed roan, was a freckled, tow-headed boy of fourteen. Pinto Abbot lived with his grandfather, old "Greenriver" Abbot, on their little cow ranch at the foot of Thunder Peak. Their outfit adjoined Luke Ivor's place.

Pinto didn't seem in any hurry as he dismounted and came into the office, and yet there was something about him that narrowed Johnny Turk's smoky

The killer leaped out of the chair and triggered a shot at Sheriff Johnny Turk

blue eyes. The boy's usually grinning features were grim-set and still, his eyes were like shadowy pits of grief.

The boy slowly sat down in a chair, staring straight ahead.

"What is it, kid?" Johnny asked sharply.

"Gramp's dead," Pinto said woodenly.

Johnny stiffened. "When'd he die?"

"Not over an hour ago."

"That's tough, button." Johnny put his hand on the boy's thin shoulder. "A bronc throw him, or what?"

Pinto looked straight at Johnny Turk then, and said flatly, "Gramp was murdered!"

"You sure of that?"

"I wasn't ten feet from him when it happened!"

Johnny sat down facing the boy. He'd counted old Greenriver Abbot and this freckled youngster among his best friends. Anger was seething inside him, but he held his voice low and soothing.

"Tell me about it, kid. Where was Greenriver when it happened?"

"Settin' in his rocker on the front porch. He finished eatin' dinner today about twelve-fifteen, as usual, and got up and went out. He sat down in the rocker, his feet propped up on a gallery post, and sat there smokin' his pipe like he's done every day since I can remember until one o'clock.

"It was about twelve-thirty when I finished the dishes and went out onto the porch. Just then I heard Gramp kind of sigh, and when I looked at him he sat all slumped in the rocker and his pipe had fallen into his lap. Then I saw the blood on his shirt front. And I knew he was dead."

"Who did it?" Johnny asked sharply.

"It was Luke Ivor!"

"I'm afraid not, kid." Johnny slowly shook his head. "I happen to know that Luke Ivor was right here in town at twelve-thirty. Didn't you *see* who shot him?"

"No, I didn't," Pinto admitted. "But I heard the rifle shot, high up on the side of Thunder Peak above the cabin. That's where the skunk hid to bushwhack Gramp."

"If you couldn't see anybody, what made you say it was Luke Ivor?"

"Because he's the only enemy Gramp had in the world. He's hated Gramp ever since Gramp caught him stealin' some of our calves and accused him before the whole town. A dozen people heard Luke Ivor threaten to put Gramp away. And bushwhack would be his way. Luke Ivor done it, and I'd like to cut out his black heart!"

"Easy, button," Johnny said softly. "I know Luke hated Greenriver and maybe wanted to kill him, but if it happened when you say, Luke *couldn't* have done it. You sure you've got the time straight?"

"I'm sure," the boy said dully.

"Where's Greenriver now?"

"Right where he died, in his rocker. I didn't touch him after makin' sure he was dead."

"That was straight thinkin'. I'll get the coroner and ride out there and we'll bring the body into town."

"I'll go with you," Pinto said. There was no emotion in his voice, no tears in his eyes. It was as if there was a stillness and a darkness inside him.

THEY FOUND things exactly as the boy had described them. The thick, gray-bearded figure of old Greenriver Abbot sat slumped in a big rocker on the porch of the three-room log cabin beside Bucktail Creek, his cold pipe still in his lap. The old rancher was stone dead.

Pot-bellied old Doc Tobey, who was coroner as well as physician, made his examination and report. Greenriver had died from a gunshot wound, inflicted by a person unknown. He had been dead from an hour-and-a-half to two hours, which would place the time at approximately twelve-thirty.

Johnny Turk helped load the body into the buckboard. He watched as Doc Tobey and the dry-eyed Pinto headed back toward Broken Bow with it. He had ridden out on his own rangy dun, and now he had decided to remain for a look-see. For, more than ever, he was determined to put a rope about the neck of the killer of old Greenriver Abbot, or a bullet into his brisket.

In common with other natives of the Bucktail Range, he knew that for many years—weather permitting—Greenriver's after-dinner routine had never varied.

Finishing his meal at approximately twelve-fifteen, he would go out onto the sunny porch, sit down in his cushioned rocker and prop his feet up on the middle gallery post. He would rock gently, smoking his pipe and gazing out over the range he loved. Promptly at one o'clock he would get up and go about what work there was to be done. The rocker was never moved from that favored spot.

Across the creek, rocky, thicket-covered Thunder Peak started its upward swing, rising until it seemed to touch the sky. This much was clear: Somebody hidden on the side of Thunder

Peak with a high-power rifle had put a bullet through Greenriver as he dreamed in his easy rocker.

Who would have reason to kill the kindly old rancher? Nobody, except Luke Ivor. And Luke Ivor, beyond the shadow of doubt, had been in Broken Bow, almost ten miles away, when Greenriver died. Johnny Turk had seen him with his own eyes.

The lanky young lawman shook his red head puzzledly. Then, although he knew the chances of finding anything were mighty slim, he mounted the dun and rode up the boulder-strewn, gully-slashed side of Thunder Peak. It was well after dark when he got back to Broken Bow. . . .

GREENRIVER ABBOT was buried the next morning. And, exactly an hour later, Johnny Turk entered the Mountain Queen saloon.

He paused just inside the batwings, his smoky eyes probing about the crowded, noisy room. They paused finally on a table near the back of the room where four men sat playing poker. He crossed and paused beside the table. Three of the card players were respected ranchers. The fourth was Luke Ivor.

Ivor looked up at the lanky sheriff, grinning sardonically. His eyes had no pupils, just pin-points of inky black flame.

"Hello, sheriff," he said smoothly. "Been to the funeral?"

Johnny nodded. "I didn't see you there."

"Because I wasn't there," Ivor sneered. "Why should I be? I wouldn't be foolin' anybody if I pretended I was sorry that ol' wart hawg was dead!"

"That's right, you wouldn't. You got time to take a little ride with me, Luke?"

Ivor's eyes narrowed warily. "Where to?"

"Why, out to Greenriver's place. I figured—"

"Why should I ride out there?" Luke Ivor had quit grinning and now he placed his hands on the table-top. "Look, sheriff—if you're accusin' me of killin' Greenriver, yuh're barkin' up the wrong stump. Accordin' to that brat of his, Greenriver was killed about twelve-thirty. I was right here in town then, and I can prove it."

"By me," Johnny nodded. "I saw you ride into town. But I need somebody to help me kind of make an experiment, and I figured maybe you wouldn't mind doing it."

"You can go plumb to—" Ivor paused, looking about the suddenly-quiet room. Then he grinned again, brazenly and arrogantly, and shoved to his feet. He sneered, "Why not? Sure, I'll help the itty-bitty boy track down his nasty ol' killer!"

A muted laugh filtered through the listeners. Johnny Turk said nothing, but turned and left the place, followed by Ivor. Johnny mounted his dun, Ivor his high-stepping black, and they headed west toward Thunder Peak.

"A good thing I happened to be in town when Greenriver was beefed," Ivor declared. "I never did make any secret about not likin' the ol' badger. Who do yuh reckon done it?"

"Hard to tell," Johnny said cryptically.

"What kind of experiment you aim to make?"

"I don't know for sure till we get there."

Ivor had to be satisfied with that. He did most of the talking from there on, alternately boasting of his own cunning and sneering at the dumbness of lawmen in general. For the most part Johnny Turk listened in glum silence.

Reaching the little ranch at the foot of Thunder Peak, they dismounted and turned their horses into a corral for watering. As they went toward the cabin, young Pinto Abbot came out onto the porch. He stared at Luke Ivor with hate and bitterness in his eyes. When Ivor grinned and said, "Hello, kid!" he remained silent.

Greenriver's old rocker retained the exact spot on the porch it had occupied so long. The cushion on it was blood-stained.

"You do what I said, button?" Johnny asked.

Pinto nodded. "I just got back. Everything's fixed."

"What's fixed?" Ivor asked suspiciously. "What's this experiment you aim to try?"

"No use wastin' time," Johnny agreed.

Kid, hand me that keg over there."

Pinto lifted an empty keg from one end of the porch and brought it to Johnny Turk. Johnny placed it on the ground, directly in front of the rocker and fifteen feet away, and sat down on it.

"Now you sit in that rocker, Luke," he instructed.

Ivor stared at the rocker, then at Johnny Turk, like a trap-wary wolf. His thin lips curled downward.

"Why should I?" he asked flatly.

"Why, to help with the experiment. You said you would . . . remember? I'd have got somebody else if I'd known—"

"Ain't that the chair Greenriver was settin' in when he was killed?"

"Sure it is. That's part of the experiment. Is there some reason why you're spooky about settin' in that chair, Luke?"

"Why should I be spooky?"

Ivor laughed sneeringly, stepped suddenly onto the porch and sat down in the rocker. He looked relieved when nothing happened. He darted a glance at Pinto Abbot, leaning silent and still-faced against the wall at the far end of the porch.

"This suit you?" he jeered.

Johnny nodded. And then, as Ivor started to get up, he said quickly, "Wait! The experiment's no good unless yuh keep settin' there till I tell you to get up."

Ivor sank back into the chair. His thin dark features were tight, his blocky body tense.

"Just take it easy," Johnny advised. "Lean back and relax. Like Greenriver was leaning when the bullet hit him."

Ivor cursed sharply, then clamped his lips and leaned back. His hand was near the silver-handled six-shooter he wore.

SEVERAL minutes passed in silence. Johnny Turk remained on the keg, idly making marks in the soft earth with his boot toe. Pinto Abbot stood at the end of the porch, his hate-filled eyes fixed unwinkingly on Luke Ivor. Ivor squirmed in the chair, occasionally swiping with the sleeve of his silk shirt at the sweat that stood out on his forehead, glancing from Johnny Turk to the motionless boy.

"How long yuh aim for me to set here?" he finally blurted.

"Until the experiment's finished," Johnny said calmly. "Ain't that chair comfortable, Luke?"

Ivor cursed wickedly. "It's not a witness chair, and I'm not on trial. I don't have to sit here!"

"That's right. But if you don't, it'll be proof you're *afraid* to sit there."

"Afraid?" Ivor tried to make his laugh arrogant, and failed. "What would I be afraid of?"

Johnny said nothing. Five more minutes passed.

Then Johnny asked, "Kid, you sure done everything just like I told you?"

"I'm sure," Pinto said.

Ivor swore hoarsely, and darted a glance upward at the scarred side of Thunder Peak. Rivulets of sweat were trickling down over his face.

"Nervous, Luke?" Johnny drawled. "Maybe afraid the killer that got Greenriver is still up there? Nobody'd want to kill you, I reckon. But maybe the gun that got Greenriver ain't particular *who* it puts a bullet into—just so he's settin' in that chair! That the way you figure it, Luke?"

Ivor said nothing. His black eyes were flared wide, his lips peeled back from white teeth in a silent grimace. Slowly, as if against his will, his gaze returned to the side of Thunder Peak.

"You know what's up there," he accused suddenly.

"Sure," Johnny nodded. "I rode up there yesterday and had a good look-see."

"You and that blasted brat aimed to get me killed!" Ivor went on savagely. "You sent the boy up there to re-set the trigger on that gun, then tricked me into settin' in this chair! You know it's due to go off any minute, and that it'll—"

Ivor's words chopped off abruptly. He leaned forward in the chair, hands gripping its sides, a wild glare of rage and fear in his eyes.

"Go on, Luke," Johnny said, very softly. "You want me to finish it? The barrel of that cocked Winchester is jammed tight between two boulders, aimed straight at that chair—the chair where old Greenriver sat every day after eatin' dinner.

"One end of a rawhide thong is tied to the trigger, the other end to a sapling several feet behind the gun. The rawhide has been soaked in water. But as it dries, takin' up the slack, it'll put gradual pressure on the trigger—until, finally, the gun fires!

"But, before the rawhide dried enough to pull the trigger, considerable time would elapse—maybe an hour, plenty of time for a man to ride from here to Broken Bow and establish an alibi. Is that what you meant to say, Luke?"

Cursing wickedly, Ivor left the chair in an incredibly swift sideward jump, grabbing at his silver-handled gun. The gun blazed as he hit the porch floor, and he rolled, tumbling from the porch and landing like a giant cat on his feet. The silver gun frothed redly again.

His first bullet had burned Johnny Turk's throat, but the second slashed into the ground at his feet. Johnny had kicked the keg backward and came up, snatching at the old range six-shooter he wore.

He'd spotted Ivor that first shot, knowing he had to make his own first one good. And he did, placing the bullet just where he wanted it, in Ivor's shoulder. It was enough to whirl the killer about and slam him against the ground, stunned and helpless but still conscious.

Ivor looked up at the lanky young sheriff standing over him, and his voice seemed to come from a vast distance.

"When I found that devilish contraption up there, Luke, I figured it was you that rigged it. But I wanted to be sure. You didn't get a chance to come back for the gun last night. It was only the black guilt inside you that made you think Pinto and me had reset the trap and aimed to get you killed. We didn't want you dead—we wanted to see you swing for the murder of old Greenriver!"

Luke Ivor felt himself sinking into unconsciousness. The last thing he saw was a slender, freckled boy whose hate-filled eyes staring at him seemed to fill the whole darkening world.

A GUN FOR BRONCO

(Concluded from page 69)

Bronco kept grinning at him."Shucks, Pop, it was really you who gave me the answer when you mentioned Parker used the gelding as a pack horse so's he could travel light and not get tired. You see, I ain't too good at figurin' but a horse, like you and me, kind of gets into habits. Him being so used to staying so close behind the buckskin on the trail that it seemed just natural that he'd keep it up."

Pop spat. "You mean you figured the gelding would still kinda think he was being led, and not try to pass Poncho?"

Bronco nodded and began rolling a smoke. "We had a mare, once, back in Ohio—used to use her on the plow. Everytime we hitched her to a wagon she got to leaning forward and straining like she was a tryin' to pull a mountain over. She was in such a habit of leanin' forward for the plow that she just never quit doin' it."

Pop smiled in sudden understanding.

"Sure," he said. "That's why Parker pulled wide going around the tree. He suspicioned what was going on. Trouble is, he made too wide a turn. It was too late then to win. Hey, Bronco!" Pop said suddenly as Bronco turned and started to leave the stable. "Where you going now, you danged fool?"

Pop didn't fully hear what Bronco said, but it sounded very much like something about going to buy a pearl handled gun.

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Delamaine stood motionless as the horses collided

TWO-GUN BLUFF

By BARRY SCOBEE

Dave Delamaine shucks his weapons and uses pure nerve!

THE new marshal sat his saddle for a while watching the workmen at the job of rebuilding the railway stockyards that had been set on fire and burned to the ground. Presently he jogged to the nearby ruins of half a dozen squatters' cabins that had caught and burned from the same set fire. The warped and ruined cookstoves and the bedirons looked desolate and pathetic in the old ashes and blowing dust of the southwestern March wind.

After a time he looked at his thick gold Waltham for the hour and at once set his horse into a trot toward town. The new marshal's official day began at two o'clock in the afternoon and lasted until the town was tucked in, whether at nine at night or three in the morning.

He left his horse in a side street and as he entered the business street he glanced at his watch again and saw that he was right on the dot. He paused and saw that people were at once looking his way. He chuckled at the sensation he knew his appearance was stirring up in the Saturday crowd of ranch and townspeople.

For he was the marshal without a gun. The gunless lawman!

His long glance took in the full length of the street. Immediately he spotted a cowboy leaning against the front of the Tie-In Saloon and knew him for a watcher. The young waddy started slightly as he saw Dave Delemaine and he pushed away from the wall and elbowed hurriedly through the saloon's leaf doors. Delemaine had a pretty good idea of what the waddy was saying inside the saloon.

"This is the baptism," Delemaine told himself, and he was faintly amused at the oddities of human conduct, his own included.

In a moment a dozen men came pouring out of the Tie-In. They bunched up and looked toward Delemaine. There was talk and laughter. Then half of them stepped down from the board sidewalk to a loaded hitchrack. All the people in the street, it appeared, were stopping and looking.

Dave Delemaine stepped down from the walk and placed himself squarely in the middle of the dusty street. He was neither young nor old. Might have been thirty-five or seventy. Not too old to be aware of a pretty girl on one sidewalk nor too young to feel a tug of pity for an old bareheaded woman on the opposite walk in obvious poverty, and alarm —and hope. Possibly one of the squatters who had been burned out by the stockyards fire.

At the hitchrack six men were jerking bridle-reins loose and upping into their saddles, in the midst of prancing, excited horses and blowing dust.

DELEMAINE grinned thinly. He hoped that some of the men who had hired him Wednesday night were along the street to see. He had walked into their meeting, and spoken his name.

"It's around over the ter'tory you want to hire a town marshal," he told them mildly.

The seven or eight men in the office of the justice of the peace peered at him intently. Then one spoke.

"What's your experience?" he asked.

"Raised up on the frontier. Been marshal of two towns."

"Why'd you quit?"

"Worked for the first town a year. It got so tame they fired me." Delemaine smiled whimsically, like a gentle old man. "Worked seven months at the other town but couldn't hit it off with the sheriff and quit. He was a gun addict. I don't use 'em."

"You—what?"

He flicked the grin of a lean, able hombre of thirty-five at their blank astonishment.

"I've seen too much useless killing, it wearies me," he said, and he might have spoken from a hundred years of sadness. "Anyhow, men will listen to persuasion and reason, or they'll bend to the prevailing wind, like trees."

A flick of derisive laughter came from some of the men.

"Umm—we got a purty rowdy bunch here, Mr. Delemaine," the spokesman said.

"So I heard."

"Not so much killing—a justified killing, or a legitimate lynching, all such can have a certain respectability. But just rowdy stuff is different. Cowboys a-tearin' up and down the streets on their horses, firing off their guns and not caring who their horses run over or what winders their bullets bust. Or rampagin' through the residential sleepin' streets after saloon closin' hours a-hollering and a-whoopin' and poppin' off their pistols. And breaking up the dances and bean suppers, very rowdy."

"It's that sort of thing yuh want stopped, I take it," Delemaine commented.

"Well, the new citizens don't like it. And neither do us older citizens, any

more, since we got a school and a church and civilization. But our wishes don't keep the Smart Alecs and drunks from performing. They say they don't want their liberties hampered by no marshal. They resent us hirin' one. 'Specially Link McCune, who's the main Smart Alec—"

"Sssh!" warned a voice. "If Link hears you called him that there'll be trouble!"

"Yeh, he'll say something to make the town snigger at me. But"—keeping on at Delemaine—"McCune and them that laugh with him are out to keep us from hirin' a marshal. They rode the first one down and broke his laig. He quit. They rode the next one outa town tied to a wild filly and he ain't been seen no more. And you without a gun—I reckon we better forget about this."

"I have some letters here from the towns I've worked in," said Delemaine.

When the little knot of leading citizens had read the letters—and they were very favorable letters—they still wanted to say 'no' to this applicant of indefinite age. But Delemaine, standing there straight and forthright, somehow was not the man who made the word easy to say. So the council whispered with their heads together and came up with a compromise.

"Tell ya, Mr. Delemaine, we'll give you a week's trial—"

"Just make it up to the first bad night," said Delemaine. "After that I'll not be a candidate or you'll want to keep me."

So this was the bad night, or afternoon, it seemed.

The six horsemen, riding abreast, came pounding straight for Delemaine. The new marshal did not skedaddle for the sidewalk. He did not even shift an inch in his planted tracks. He stood with his hands down at his sides—except that he thrust one hand into a pants pocket and brought it out again—and faced the onslaught and waited.

And the six hammering horses, instinctively opposed to plunging into an unmoving object, especially a human being, split into threes. Three on one side of Delemaine, three on the other side.

They divided so violently they knocked into one another. The sudden melee threw them around. A big dun reared and flicked his body. The rider was hurtled from the saddle. He landed in a sitting posture in the dust of the street, with a chugging grunt.

Delemaine saw that the man sitting on the ground, bracing himself with his thick arms, was the short, thick man who had been pointed out to him on Thursday as the mainspring of the rowdy crowd, Link McCune.

McCune, the new marshal had been informed, was a prosperous cattle ranchman who loved the admiration of the saloon crowds and his rowdy cowhands, and who could think up more practical jokes than a cub bear. In other words, a man who liked his fun, such as it was.

Like burning the stockyards because they were on the wrong side of the town to suit him. And the incidental burning out of the squatters. That had been a sort of incidental sideshow to the main circus, but McCune and some of his boys had got a hearty laugh out of the funny sight of the squatters frantically fighting the fire with blankets or coats or women's skirts, anything they could grab to save their homes, such as they were, in the middle of winter weather. Anyhow McCune didn't have no use for sich cow-stealin' rags-and-tags.

McCUNE made no effort to get up. The other five horsemen came swirling back, uncoiling their saddle-ropes. They enveloped Delemaine. One flung his noose viciously. It fell around Delemaine's neck. Before it could completely tighten Delemaine's right hand flipped up. The blade of a spring knife in it popped open. It slashed the rope in two. Two more loops swished. They were cut just as quickly.

In the surprised, momentary hush Delemaine lifted the three loops from his shoulders and tossed them to the hands of crowding small boys.

"Halters for your ponies," he said and gave them a friendly wink.

"Hey, you!" shrilled one of the riders. "You cut my hair rope."

"Was it yores?" said Delemaine.

The man's little mouth tightened in an ugly, vindictive fashion. Delemaine

had been told already that the fellow had shot a Mexican to get the hair rope.

The other two riders, who had had a bit of trouble with their horses, were now looping their ropes. McCune, still sitting flat on the ground, drawled at them.

"Save yore ropes, boys, save yore nooses. We gonna need 'em."

Some of the gathering crowd grinned and sniggered at that, catching McCune's meaning—that the new marshal was in for a hanging.

Delemaine swept a glance over the gathering faces. Not all had laughed, by any means. Those who hadn't were looking anxious, or shocked, even a little scared. It told Delemaine a lot about McCune.

McCune flung out a stubby arm at Delemaine and shouted, "Hand me my hat!" It was out of his reach.

For a second Delemaine was a hard thin-mouthed man, then he mellowed and bent and took up the big hat. He pivoted to a position behind the sitting ranchman, poked the hat up into a peak, turned the brim under and in on two sides, and jammed the thing hard down on McCune's spikey-haired head.

The kids around caught it instantly and squealed with laughter. A dunce cap! A fool's cone. Older people gulped in amusement and swallowed their laughs.

"Git that thing off o' yore noggin, Link!" one of the riders yelled.

McCune got his five-feet-six, chunky body to its feet. A fresh squall of laughter broke out at the ridiculous figure. McCune tried to defend himself, as he always did in a pinch, by throwing in with the play. He danced two or three awkward cub-bear steps and flopped his arms. People turned away to hide their disgusted amusement. McCune realized what they were doing. Knew that he was being laughed at instead of with as usual.

Delemaine, watching every turn of thought and feeling in the man and the crowd, saw a whip of anger dart into McCune's eyes.

Then McCune lifted his hat off with both hands, and looked at its shape, and knew that Delemaine had made a dunce of him. Surprise and anger filled his clownish face. But he wouldn't accept the belittlement. He tried to cover up by placing the fool's cone back on his head. He took the reins of his caught horse from a cowboy's hands and pulled himself up to the saddle.

Laughter broke out afresh. Small boys tried to push back their shrieks with their fists to their mouths. And Delemaine thought that was what finally got completely under McCune's thick hide. Too contrary to reshape his hat, yet he couldn't take a laughing-at by the kids.

"I'll git yore scalp for this!" he roared out at Delemaine.

The merriment hushed instantly. But a new tone of laughter came from others. The laughter that was with McCune, nagging at Delemaine. There was, Delemaine realized, a certain drollery about McCune, even in anger, that made some people laugh. Besides, a lot of people were habituated to laugh at anything the man might say. Underlings laughing loudly at the king's wit.

Then McCune wheeled his horse away, but in the last instant Delemaine caught a final stab, at him, of vicious wrath and hatred.

For a minute Delemaine remained in the street. The crowd around him, and those on the sidewalks, were looking at him as if they were already seeing him hanged and dead. He grinned and waved a cheerful hand. Some smiled and nodded in answer.

DELEMAINE knew that he had won the first round with the rowdy bunch. Knew, too, that that would only whet them to do more. He was never a man to put off a chore that had to be done. Yet he didn't see any immediate next move.

One of the bits of official duties that he had assigned to himself already was to ride each afternoon around among the houses away from the business street to give people an opportunity to speak with him, make complaints if they wished to. He decided to make that ride now, and returned to his horse.

Aboard the keen-legged, intelligent bay, he decided to ride through the main drag to give McCune an excuse for starting something if he wished to do it. The

young waddy was watching again outside the Tie-In. The horses of McCune and his men were at the rack. Delemaine lifted his hand in cheerful greeting to the cowboy and grinned. Farther on Delemaine was stopped by Rainey Crow, the justice of the peace. The fat man's eyes twinkled.

"What's yore fav'rite whisky, Dave?" he asked. "I'll drink deep to the repose of yore soul when McCune gets finished with you."

Delemaine looked back toward the watcher and spoke loudly, "Oh, just riding out toward the stockyards."

"You durn jigger," wheezed the fat man, "you invitin' people to your own hanging? Heh-heh-heh," he chuckled, "that's the first time McCune ever got the sticky end of anything. He'll shore raise yore ante."

"And I don't hold an ace," said Delemaine.

As he turned out of the business street east for the stockpens he wondered if McCune would follow. Well, the affair might as well come to a head now as later, though he didn't have the slightest idea what he would do.

When he had gone through the blowing dust a couple of blocks or so he heard the soft pound of a coming horse. As the rider emerged from the dust smoke Delemaine saw that it was not McCune but a lean younger man with a long, hard-set face. The new marshal waited for him.

"You don't know me and I don't know you," the man said as he pulled up, looking Delemaine straight in the eyes, neither friendly nor unfriendly. "But I hate to see anybody ganged up on."

"McCune and his boys fixing things up, are they?"

"The three jaspers have got new, fresh ropes. The one that you cut his hair rope, he says you're his maverick. A kid cowhand come into the Tie-In and says you're heading for the new loading pens. Link and six or seven yammers lined up for a final shot of poison. And Link was braggin' he would be back pronto and pay for the next round with yore ears for money."

"Umm—" murmured Delemaine. "He'd be kind of disappointed, now, wouldn't he, if he couldn't do that?"

"He'd feel like you'd double-crossed him. He'd be plumb mad. They'll be here any minute, Mister. You'd better join up with the far away riders, maybe."

"Why have you come to tell me?" Delemaine asked.

"Well, maybe I seen you jam that pointed sombrero down on Link's haid." A little grin flicked for an instant on the grim mouth. "Nobody ever done anything like that before. You'd better ride, Mister."

"Yeh, I'll mosey on. Thanks, cowboy."

"Uh—you want I should ride with you?"

"No. I play my own hand."

"Well, hope you deal yoreself a royal flush—you'll need it."

The man's friendly act set a warm spot to glowing in Delemaine's heart. It proved again what he had often said, that most men are not bad but generous and fair.

As he jogged on toward the pens he kept looking back. In a minute or two a bunch of men raced into the street three blocks away. The dust half veiled them. But he felt they had seen him. He lifted the wiry bay into a fast canter.

This could turn out to be something pretty rough. Not much use staying in the game without any chips. But he hated to quit, now that he had started. Then he remembered that he had said McCune would be disappointed if he didn't pay for the next round of drinks with Delemaine's ears. A streak of humor went through Delemaine. Why not dodge McCune now and let him go back to town without the trophies? Probably it would make the clown sorer than ever and tune up his determination to get even.

And a showdown was what Delemaine wanted, but it must happen in the presence of plenty of town people to witness the outcome.

Delemaine glanced back over his shoulder. The bunch of riders was more than three blocks away. Delemaine's bay was gaining. Then a sweep of brown dust cut off his view. Instantly he veered sharply to the left and went racing, completely hidden by the blowing dust.

FREE of pursuit, Delemaine presently turned in at a pair of tents at the north edge of town. He was no sooner off his horse than a small girl of six or so and her toddler brother came shrilling from one of the tents.

"Uncle Dave—Uncle Dave!"

"You kids!" he said fondly. "Don't you know this wind will pick you both up and hang you on the clothesline?"

The children squealed delightedly. Delemaine picked one up under each arm and headed for the tent.

"But we don't have any clothesline," the little girl protested. "It burned in the big fire with the stockyards and the stove and the beds and my dolly."

Delemaine pushed through the flaps of the tent. A charcoal fire glowed in an iron cooking pot. A woman sat by it hemming a new sheet by hand. Her appearance of agelessness, her finely molded nose and lips and her gentleness, marked her as the new marshal's sister. A smile lighted her face.

"These ruffians of yores, Nan!" he said, and set the children down.

"They love you, Dave. They've been looking for your visit ever since noon. Oh Dave, you're the best brother folks ever had. If you hadn't sent money after McCune burned out the settlement I don't know what we would have done."

"You'd have got along," Delemaine said, and looked at her with an abiding affection. "And McCune calls people like you rag-a-tag."

"Is he in town?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Dave, I'm afraid for you."

"Don't you worry a minute, Sis. I've faded tougher samples than he ever will be."

"You've seen him?"

"You bet. And something's cooking, that I've put on the stove. I'm going to let it simmer a while and give Bowen a hand with the house job—I see him out there busy, in this gale."

Bowen Landry, wind-blown and patient, was bolting foundation plates to a fieldstone foundation for a three-room house. Delemaine tied his horse between two piles of lumber, out of the cold wind and out of sight of passersby.

"Two men can do that job better than one, in this howler," he told his brother-in-law. "You'll have a house inside of two weeks."

Landry laughed ruefully, but somehow with strength, for a squatter.

"We sure will, Dave, if you keep using yore job and sleeping time to help."

"The job isn't losing anything right now," Delemaine replied. "It's simmering up for a nice stew later in the day."

When Delemaine left his brother-in-law the thick Waltham showed after five o'clock. The marshal took a long swing through the outlying parts of the town. Dusk was shadowing the streets when he left his horse and entered the main drive. Teams and saddle animals were at the tie-racks around the as yet empty town square, where a courthouse would be built in due time.

Delemaine wondered if he would be here when that transpired. He liked this town. A good many people were still around, indicating there would be a big attendance at the dance that, he understood, was held every other Saturday night.

In the normal round of a marshal's duties he went to the Tie-In Saloon. A lot of men were in the big high-ceilinged room, at the bar and in groups. As the leaf doors fan-fanned behind him the steady roar of talk and laughter died like a wind and every eye watched him.

A crowd gave back from the bar, exposing Link McCune. The short, thick man's big hat was on the back of his head, tilted rakishly, showing his straw-colored, spiky hair. In his eyes, his round face, his manner, was the look of a spicy gabber who had been bandying windy boasts and thrusty wit with his admirers. He spread his legs and his hand, no doubt unwittingly, dropped to his belt gun.

"Hi, you," McCune shouted at the top of his voice, "what hole you been hidin' away in?"

There was a flippancy, an expectation of admiring laughter from his fellows, underneath the loudness.

AND the laughter came, from half the crowd, that had got used to thinking anything McCune said was funny. But some of the laughter had a nagging edge, from the waddies closest around McCune. A nagging rasp to rub

Delemaine raw. Delemaine gave little heed to that, he was scanning the crowd to see how many laughed. And he knew that less than half of them did. Satisfied, he returned his pleasant stare to McCune.

"Now it's my turn to ask a question," he said. "What did you do with my ears, Mac?"

A titter in a different tone went over the crowd. McCune didn't like it.

"You run too fast to yore hidin' out hole for us to ketch ya," he howled. "You got till dance startin' time to crawl outa town on yore belt buckle, Mister Law. You better go smellin' of the ground right now and be far away."

The nagging laughs again, like flying splinters. Delemaine held his temper.

"Why the delay, Macky-boy? What are you waiting for?" he asked.

"Don't you Macky-boy me, you—"

A very young and very drunk nondescript youth reeled toward Delemaine.

"Hey, you, whash y'r name?" he demanded.

Delemaine reached for the sloppy staggerer to keep him from falling. McCune bawled a threat.

"Don't try takin' him outa here, you nosy Law."

Another man spoke up. "He can take him out as far as I am concerned."

It was a man Delemaine hadn't seen. He was able looking, quiet, neatly dressed like a prosperous ranchman. Beside him stood the long-faced tight-mouth who had warned Delemaine in the afternoon that McCune and his rowdies were following Delemaine to the stockpens.

"The boy ought to be taken out," the ranchman said, quietly, "before he makes a nuisance of himself in this warm room. How about it, Joe?"

Joe Bender, the big sandy-haired bartender, gave Delemaine a slight nod. The marshal liked Honest Joe, as he was called. In Delemaine's three days in town they had already had pleasant conversations. Delemaine slid an arm around the youngster—where some Laws might have been rough in voice and manner—and supported him toward the door.

"You need a little fresh air, son. It'll make you feel better."

"Do' wan' no flesh air," the boy mumbled, but did not resist, and went out with the marshal.

Delemaine took the youngster to the calaboose and covered him, gentle as a mother, with a blanket to keep off the cold.

Delemaine made a routine tour of the business street, including the other saloon, which was quiet enough. Then he dropped into the little shack office of Justice of the Peace Rainey Crow. A kerosene lamp was already lit.

"You better git yore dancin' done early tonight, Dave," the fat and cheerful judge twinkled. "Link and his rowdies have got plans laid to take Halibut Ann's girlies tuh the shindig. If it so happens, you'll be crowded off the floor."

"You use mild words, Judge," said Delemaine, with his ageless grin.

"Halibut Ann, she's come hyar clean from Galveston. Reckon that accounts for her fishy name, as I heard theh's fish by that cognomen. She's gee-hawin' for Link McCune's money and I reckon she'll let her girls attend. If they try it there'll be the dang-blastedest cat fight you er me ever saw. And throat-cuttin's and gun-shootin's. The element that likes to live long lives is lookin' to you to prevent it."

"Those are able looking guns you've got there," said Delemaine, nodding at a brace of pearl-handled revolvers fastened to the shack wall.

He had noticed the guns before but hadn't mentioned them. Now they made a vague idea dawn in his mind.

"Yeh," said Rainey Crow. "Dow Walliston had 'em clutched in his fists after the posse got through with him. Ever' shot fired. Nobody wants 'em on account they might turn out unlucky."

"How 'bout giving me the loan of them, Rainey?"

"Eh? The gunless lawman? And ruinate your repytashun? Nosireebob. You've started out to peacify this town with yo' bare hands, and you goin' to do it thataway or you goin' to blow out with the wind." Then he added what he really meant: "You mightn't be any good with guns, Dave, and I'd hate to see you die of *toxicodendric plumbum*."

"I would too." Delemaine smiled.

"What is it?"

"Lead poisoning, dang it. Maybe I say it right, maybe I don't."

They smiled at their lightness, and sat in silence for a while, except for the wind plucking at loose boards on the shack. Delemaine liked men with whom he could sit in silence. After a while he spoke.

"The guns loaded?" he asked.

"Emptier'n a hobo's dream."

"Caliber?"

"Now I'd have to move and look in that cigar box yonder to find out—it's where I emptied Dow's belt of its surplus ammynition after he didn't need it no more."

Delemaine got up presently, nodded, and went out into the windy darkness that was touched, far out and lonesomely beyond the town lights, by the remnant of a glowing Southwestern sunset.

DELEMAINE got supper at Kate's Table restaurant. Kate was a woman of quiet face, full lips, and strong shapely hands. Already he liked to loiter over his meals and talk with her. She was much like his sister. But all he had a chance to say this time was:

"Full house tonight, Miss Kate—people are hungry."

"Hungry for blood," she whispered. "Watch your step, Dave Delemaine."

On the street again the marshal heard two hurrying boys say:

"Going to shoot all the windows outa the dance hall."

"Going to shoot the stovepipe down too. Dad says—"

The rest of the talk was lost in the wind.

Because the ranch people had nowhere else to go they liked to start the dances early. Delemaine sauntered past the new white-painted hall. Quite a few people already were there. He covered the business section again. At no time through the afternoon had he encountered the sheriff. That individual, somebody had said, liked to make himself hard to find on dance nights. And Delemaine did not find him now, but at the far end of the street one of the men who had hired him three nights before hurried up behind and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Delemaine," he said, "word has got around that Link McCune and his men are going to bring Halibut Ann's girls to the dance. The respectable women there now are about to go back home."

"Your idee is to stop things before they start," Delemaine replied.

"Exactly."

"Mine, too."

"You're going to have to push along a little mite then, Delemaine. My kid just told me that Link and his bunch are putting the hard polish on their drinking and will be starting things right away."

"I'll shove in right away, Mr. Brown."

"Sure wish you would, Delemaine."

Rank anxiety rode his words, and was in Brown's steps as he hurried back toward the hall. Delemaine hurried too, the few doors to Justice Crow's shack office. It was dark. Delemaine touched the door latch. His vague planning for forcing the show-down had crystallized to a definite idea. Once started it would go fast. To his surprise the door was not locked. Rainey Crow had probably left it unlocked purposely, with an understanding as big and warm as his fat body. As he went inside Delemaine had the fine feeling that he already possessed good friends here.

A store light across the street gave him some light here. He lifted down the two pearl-handled six-guns from their screwhooks. He clicked open the cylinders of each, and found them empty. At the cigar box Crow had indicated he found loose cartridges. He loaded one gun cylinder full, six shells. The other gun he left empty.

Concealing the guns against his ribs under his folded arms he walked swiftly along the board walk toward the Tie-In Saloon. The high black wind was in his face, in his teeth. He liked that. It was something definite to resist and fight.

When Delemaine pushed through the wing doors he had the guns gripped in his two fists, by their barrels. Someone gave a startled, warning yip. The gabble of the thirty or so men in the place broke off like a dry stick. Every eye turned on him. He moved forward, smiling a little ageless smile.

A knot of men gave way. In the open space Link McCune was in front of the

middle of the bar, his usual show spot. His hand flicked to his gun. Delemaine held up both his guns to show that he had them by the barrels. He stopped at the rounded end of the high mahogany counter. Joe Bender the barman was the first to speak and his words were whimsical and unhurried.

"Dave, you know doggone well it's against the rules to shoot four-five men in here at once and the same time."

"Joe," said Delemaine, and he laid the guns on the bar, butts toward Bender, "these guns are something special. I want you to take 'em back to the office there at the other end of this bar and give them a good looking. Open 'em, see everything about them, so maybe you can swear in court later, if need be."

For a moment their eyes met and held. Their mutual liking was a telegraph wire of understanding between them. Joe nodded and took up the guns and started back toward the little office.

"Hey, you Joe, you siding in with the law?" McCune howled.

"I live on the law, Link," said Joe Bender.

WITH Bender out of sight a silence as heavy as the world was on the room, until one of McCune's crew, he who had had his hair rope cut, finally spoke:

"What we waitin' on, Link?" he asked.

"On Joe," said Delemaine, and there was a quality of command in him that held even Link McCune in his tracks, and silent.

Delemaine scanned around the room. He thought for a moment that the only man present that he could say he was acquainted with was Joe Bender, then he saw Judge Rainey Crow's fat figure by the stove, leaning back in his chair against the wall, a Buddha figure with a faint, waiting smile on his soft lips.

Faces now were pressing against the front windows, and men were craning over the tops of the door leaves, afraid to come in.

Then Joe was back, behind the bar, with the guns gripped in his fists. He held the two weapons toward Delemaine.

"No, Joe, I don't want them," the marshal said. "Lay them on the bar. There in the middle. That's it, with the butts toward McCune. Right! Now Joe, I'd take it kindly if you'd tell McCune what's what about those guns."

"Well," said Joe, "they're just the same as they was when the posse took them out of Dow Walliston's limber hands. Except one is loaded with killin' ca'tridges and the other'n ain't."

"One full loaded and one empty and harmless, is that it, Joe?"

"That's the song and that's the story."

"Gents," said Delemaine, "you all know Joe better than I know him. I am told he has a reputation for absolute honesty and reliability. If that is true you've got to take his word now."

Delemaine stepped up within double arms' length of McCune. The two guns were within their reach.

"McCune," said Delemaine, "I don't know which one of those guns is loaded. Neither do you. You reach out and take your pick. I'll take what you leave. Then we'll begin to pull triggers."

Somebody in the crowd grunted, as if hurt. Link McCune gave back a step.

"You crazy?" he demanded.

Delemaine thumbed at the six-guns. "Take your choice, McCune."

Faced by the iron in Delemaine, McCune gave his lips a lick.

"Leaping blazes!" he muttered.

His glance slid around. No admiration now. No nagging laughter. Just men waiting. Waiting to see what he was made of. The clownishness was gone from him. The Smart Alec popupishness fell away from him as youth falls away.

It was tough, watching the courage die in a man, Delemaine thought. But then he had felt that it would be this way, after his first close regard of McCune, out there in the street in the afternoon. The man, he had been convinced, had no deep courage. Only the bravery of a bully.

One of McCune's boots dragged back half a step. His mouth was open. Abruptly he half turned and stared at his men, at other men, at all of them there. And what he saw made him cringe faintly and seemed to shrivel.

"You fangless coyotes!" he snarled, but it was an empty snarl, the throaty looseness of a whipped man.

One of his own men grunted in disgust. "Let's go to the ranch, fellers," he said, "and git our gear and pull out."

Three of them went tramping for the door. McCune's desperate look came back to Delemaine. His hand went to his belt gun. In a swift reach Delemaine's right hand closed on McCune's wrist and twisted it away. Delemaine's right hand lifted McCune's gun out. He laid it on the bar.

"Joe will give you yore gun back, McCune," said Delemaine, "when you are ready to leave town. Just now I'll mention that the railroad is going to sue you for burning the stockpens. And the six families of squatters are going to sue too. Unless you want to pay them for their losses and save court costs."

McCune once again swept the men with his glance.

Then, at what he still read there, he faced Delemaine again.

"I—I've meant all the time to square it with them folks," he said.

His eyes almost went to the two six-guns on the bar, but he jerked them away.

"Settle with them Monday, McCune," said Delemaine. "They need the money."

Delemaine smiled his quiet, ageless smile at the crowd.

"Is that dance music I hear on the wind?" he asked.

THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 9)

gun experts, he adhered to the practice of fanning. Using a pair of heavy .44 calibre revolvers, triggerless, he fired in rapid fashion by fanning the hammer.

He also won fame as a horseman. This almost-legendary character claimed the record of the longest ride on horseback. He left Lincoln, Nebraska, in the middle of March, 1893, and traveled to New York City and returned the latter part of December, having covered a distance of 5,500 miles, or an average of nearly twenty miles a day for each day from the time he left Lincoln until his return, not even allowing for time spent in stopovers, and he made the complete ride without a single change of horses. This story seems to prove that in addition to his knowledge about firearms, Dr. Tanner also knew horses and how to get the most out of them without injury.

A Great Career Ends

Dr. Tanner continued his medical practice until about four years ago, when ill health forced him to retire. In June, 1943, he suffered a broken leg and two weeks later, on July 2nd, 1943, death brought to a close the career of Diamond Dick.

While he did not pursue or capture stagecoach robbers or other outlaws, while he did not fight Indians, or capture cattle rustlers, the life of Diamond Dick, his genuine quality, was an inspiration to many a youngster during his career, and no doubt that inspiration helped to make law-abiding, useful citizens of many who looked upon Diamond Dick as one of America's greatest frontier characters.

Along about the time that Diamond Dick was in the limelight as one of the world's firearm experts, there were plenty of firearms being used in Wyoming and there was another character that Sundown Slim says has never gotten his proper recognition. He was taking part in the Wyoming gunplay, in fact he lost his life in it, and it is the manner in which he lost his life that makes this tale one that will make any man who admires bravery admire this Western character—Nate Champion.

Wyoming Range War

There was a regular range war going on in Wyoming. The cattlemen were bent upon driving out the small settlers, and it is true that there were cattle rustlers and horse thieves among the settlers, but the principal reason for the cattlemen wanting to drive them out was that they were cutting up the range by homesteading or settling and thereby interfering with the free use of all the range that the cattlemen had been used to.

There were among those settlers many good, honest, law-abiding citizens, and it is claimed that much of the thievery and cattle rustling was planned by the cattle interests in order to throw blame and suspicion upon all settlers.

For a time, at the home or cabin of any settler who had been dubbed a rustler, a few men would appear, and either shoot the settler or take him out and hang him to a tree. Sometimes the raiding party would come disguised as officers of the law, as they did with Tom Waggoner, who had a place near Newcastle. He had accumulated quite a herd of horses. Three men appeared at his home, claiming to be deputy United States marshals. They arrested Waggoner, and supposedly started to jail with him, but hung him to a cottonwood tree a couple of miles from his home.

Not long after the Waggoner hanging a body of men rode up to the cabin on Powder River occupied by Nate Champion and Ross Gilbertson, two settlers. The two men were awakened from sleep by the would-be lynchers. Champion came up with guns smoking, the cabin filled with smoke and the posse retreated. They took with them the body of a man Champion had killed.

A Raid Against Rustlers

Rumors of an organized raid by the cattlemen against the so-called rustlers had been flying about the country for some time, and early the next year after the Champion incident the organization of an "army" that was to clean out the cattle thieves was openly discussed wherever men met.

Everybody knew what was going on, for the men who were engineering the adventure made no effort to conceal their plans and movements. It was announced almost openly that twenty-five men were to be hanged and a hundred others driven out of the country.

The Denver *Republican* of April 8th, 1892, carried in its news columns an interview with a prominent official of the Wyoming Board of Livestock Commissioners, a board created by an act of the state legislature. He was asked about the Wyoming situation, which had been reported in press dispatches as becoming somewhat serious.

He stated frankly (according to the *Republican*) that a party of about sixty well known cattlemen of the state had left Cheyenne about April 5th for the region in which the cattle rustlers had been operating, with the full intention of taking such drastic action as would put a stop to the lawlessness. He explained that the army was under the command of a well-known Wyoming cattleman, was equipped for any emergency and even carried with them a capable surgeon.

"Wanted" Men

North of Casper on the Powder River this army surrounded the K C ranch during the night. They had information that Nick Ray and Nate Champion were there, both of them "wanted" by the invaders. A wagon at the stable, loaded with camp plunder, indicated the possibility that others might be in the house. Orders were given not to shoot unless certain as to the identity of anyone leaving the house.

At daylight a man stepped from the ranchhouse door and walked to the stream for a bucket of water. He was a stranger and as he stopped to get the water, he was captured and taken behind the stable where the leaders were hidden. A few minutes later another man, also a stranger, came to the stable and was captured. The strangers were trappers and from them it was learned that Nick Ray and Nate Champion were the only others in the cabin.

Ray came out and started for the woodpile for firewood. A volley of shots rang out. He fell, badly wounded, about ten feet from the cabin door. He crawled on all fours toward the doorstep and collapsed.

A Brave Rescue

Twice Champion faced the rifles of the surrounding army in an effort to drag his wounded friend into the cabin. The first time he exchanged shots with the besiegers, but being encumbered by his rifle he could not handle the wounded man. A few minutes later he dragged his companion inside while rifle balls splintered the logs around him. Men who were there and who were accustomed to nervy action have said it was the bravest rescue they ever saw.

The siege lasted all day. Champion took care of his dying companion, held the gunmen at bay, and in the intervals found time to write an account of the affair in a cheap memorandum book. He was as cool and brave a man as ever went to his death in any of the deadly battles that have characterized the cattle country.

The story of the burning of the K C cabin by means of a wagon rolled down against it, loaded with blazing pitch-pine wood, of Champion's dash for liberty through the

flames, and of his death, is a [illegible] of Western life that stirs the blood.

Champion may have been a horse thief and a mavericker, but he was a superb fighter, one who could look death in the face without a quiver of fear. The men who killed him afterward paid tribute to his courage.

The Blood-Soaked Notebook

Champion was as brave as a lion. He came out of the cabin with his rifle in his hand. The whole gang opened up on him. He fired but one shot as he ran. The first volley broke his arm and he could not use his rifle. He stumbled and fell, riddled with bullets. Champion fell far enough from the house to keep his body from being burned. The men searched his body. On it, soaked with blood and with a bullet hole through it, they found the notebook in which he had calmly set down the incidents of the fight and the last hours of his life.

Some of the paragraphs in the notebook read: "Nick is shot but not dead yet. He is awful sick. I must go and wait on him. It is now about two hours since the first shots. . . . Nick is still alive. They are shooting all around the house. The bullets are coming like hail. . . . Nick is dead. He died about nine o'clock. I don't think they intend to let me get away this time. . . . I feel pretty lonesome right now, wish there was someone here with me so we could watch all sides at once. . . . Well, they have just got through shelling the house again. . . . I hear them splitting wood. I guess they are going to fire the house tonight. I think I'll make a break tonight if I live. . . . The house is all fired. Good-by, boys, if I never see you again, Nathan D. Champion."

He made his run for life and lost. The attackers pinned a card upon the breast of the dead man. It read, "Cattle thieves beware." They might have added, "Here lies the body of a brave man who died unafraid". *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles rode into Fort Tejon, in California, alive with pleasant expectations. To Captain Bob Pryor, it was like a visit home; for the taste and smell of an army post still brought back vividly to him his own army days. And there was the prospect of long sessions of bunkhouse gab with his old saddle-mates like Lieutenant Barling.

But instead of cheer, he found tragedy. Lieutenant Barling was under arrest—convicted of shooting an old Chinese in the back and robbing him—and under sentence of life imprisonment at the army prison on Alcatraz island.

Pryor heard this stunning news in Major White's office, where at the same time he met the chief witness against Lieutenant Barling. This was a dark-skinned man with a faintly Oriental look about him, named Rey Manilla.

"I can't believe it," the Rio Kid exclaimed. "I knew Barling well and I'd bet every cent I ever hope to have that he ain't guilty!"

"You are the same as calling me a liar, sir!" Manilla cried. Red anger flamed in his eyes and he flipped back the tail of his coat as though to reach for the butt of his gun. It was a practised draw, smooth and instinctive.

The Rio Kid's fist whipped out and crashed against Manilla's jaw, unhinging his knees and spilling him to the floor.

"I'm sorry you did that Pryor," Major White snapped. Then his eyes twinkled and he added, "I've had the urge to do that myself for a long time."

The Rio Kid knew he had made an implacable enemy, but he was not disturbed. There was something evil about Manilla. Moreover, with his staunch faith in his friends, he had already assumed that Manilla was lying and that Barling had somehow been framed.

This impression was strengthened later when he visited Barling in the guard house and heard his story. Right then, over Barling's protests, the Rio Kid made a little promise to himself to track down Manilla and clear this business up.

Manilla and a gunman named Mike Jarel rode out of Fort Tejon with a lumbering freight wagon following their mounts. Next morning, Pryor and Celestino followed, on the road to Los Angeles.

Some distance out they passed a stage depot. A shifty-eyed stock boy admitted that Manilla's party had camped for the night a short piece down the road.

"Watch out for ambush from here on," the Rio Kid muttered as they left. Cutting across the ridge to save a bend in the road, Pryor glanced back toward the stage depot. A column of black smoke was climbing up into

the sky. It broke into short puffs which stopped and rose again.

"Injun smoke signals," Mireles said.

"It's that hombre at the station. And now Manilla knows we are on his back trail."

Rain came down from the lowering skies in a torrent. Lightning tore the sky apart and thunder rolled like a thousand cannon. Celestino's horse reared in fright, lost his footing and slipped. To save himself, Celestino left the saddle.

The Rio Kid whirled Saber and grabbed for the pinto's reins. At that moment a rifle blasted somewhere and a bullet snarled past his ear.

Through the rain he could see the heavy freight wagon up ahead in a grove of oak trees. A shadowy figure ducked into a boulder clump near the wagon's tail gate.

"Keep down, Celestino!" Pryor yelled.

He knew he had to cover his unhorsed companion, so he drew both six-guns and charged Saber directly at the wagon. Three guns opened up instantly on him.

With box Colts roaring, The Rio Kid charged. A sombrero appeared above the rocks and Pryor instantly put a bullet through it. The bushwhacker threw up both hands and fell back out of sight. The other guns were silent instantly, except for Celestino's.

Pryor whirled Saber back to his friend. There was silence in the rain-dripping forest, except for the faint thud of departing hoofs.

"They are gone?" Celestino asked.

They were, except for a dead man sprawled behind the boulders. He was a stranger, but they gave him a hasty burial, rather than to leave his body for the coyotes.

"Well, war has been declared," Pryor said, gazing off through the rain in the direction of Los Angeles. "Now Manilla's got our measure and we've got his. There'll be plenty doing, amigo."

There was. The framework of a conspiracy which began with an accusation of murder against Lieutenant Barling led through politics and the smuggling of Chinese into California to the highest places in the territory. And death leaned close and reached with bony fingers many times for the reckless pair who gambled their lives to save a friend's honor in GOLDEN EMPIRE, by Dean Owen, next issue's complete Rio Kid novel.

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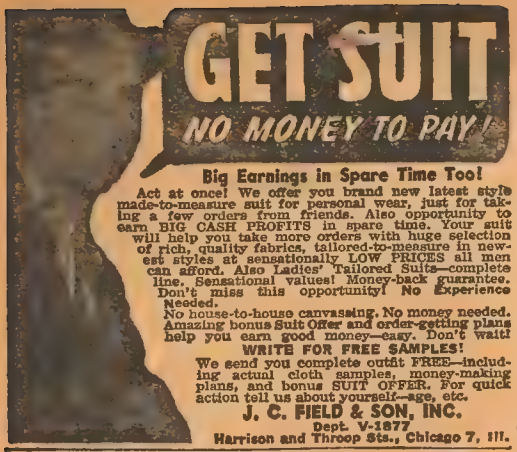

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With this full length novel as the *pièce de résistance,* as our French neighbors say, is a powerful novelette called THIRTY DAYS HATH SAM REBER, a tense drama of the old West by Joseph Chadwick.

In the early days of the Texas Panhandle the land seemed like a limitless sea of grass without houses or fences to break its flow, with room enough for a whole nation to lose itself. But there were men who saw even then that some day this land would be more valuable than gold, that some day men would fight and scheme and cheat for acres now held lightly.

One of these men was Sam Reber, a pioneer who was willing to trade his strength and labor for the promise of a home and a bit of security in life.

Another man who saw it no less clearly was Hard John Flint, who knew that the time to set the foundation of a great cattle kingdom was now, while land was cheap. Sam Reber was in his way and Hard John Flint was no man to let a small annoyance remain in his way. Nor was Matt Drogan, Flint's segundo. Especially after Sam Reber stopped Drogan from beating a man to death with a whip. There was no love lost between Drogan and Reber after that.

It was inevitable that these three should clash, for with miles and miles of wind-blown grass all about, the country was still too small for the three of them. The clash, when it came, was climaxed in bloody war, fought out of the sound of towns, out of the reach of such things as law. It was just an isolated drama of heroism in one of the lost places of the world, the sort of thing which must have happened many times in the turbulent history of our frontier. Look for THIRTY DAYS HATH SAM REBER, it's a fine story!

The next issue will also contain fast-action short stories, *The Bunkhouse,* by Foghorn Clancy, portraits and biographies of great

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

IN CASE any of you rannies out there feel you'd rather do your writing with a branding iron than a typewriter, this is to let you know you needn't be modest. You can use a newfangled writing machine, a pencil, or a goose quill and it won't make no never mind to us nohow. Just drop us a line—letter or postcard—and tell us how you like THE RIO KID WESTERN, what you'd like to see in it if you don't already see it, and—perish forbid—if there is something you don't like. We here who work on the magazine have a hankering to keep posted about how our efforts are succeeding, sabe?

For example, here's a letter from way out West:

I have been reading THE RIO KID WESTERN for a long time. I have enjoyed it very much and just wanted to tell you to keep up the good work. My favorite story is RAIDERS OF THE VALLEY, which was in the October, 1946, issue. The only thing I don't like about THE RIO KID WESTERN is that when I have finished it I can hardly wait for the next

[*Turn page*]

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issue to be on sale. *Ray Muñoz, Jr., Central, New Mexico.*

See? That's the kind of criticism that never discourages an editor. To know that he is making someone happy by being a good picker of stories—that's a real reward.

Here's a chuckline rider who, I think is joshing us:

I love to read THE RIO KID WESTERN and some of your other magazines too, like THE MASKED RIDER WESTERN and TEXAS RANGERS and THE RANGE RIDERS WESTERN. There's only one thing bothers me and I have nightmares about it. What would happen if an unbeatable manhunter like the Rio Kid, or Jim Hatfield the Ranger, met up with Wayne Morgan, the unbeatable Robin Hood outlaw? Oh me, I am going mad worrying about it. Tell me quick, who would win?—*Albert Cross, Chicago, Ill.*

Well, Bert, it's like this. True the Rio Kid, or the Lone Wolf Ranger have never failed to catch their man. And true, Wayne Morgan has never been caught. It's the old story of the irresistible force and the immovable object. But you see, the Rio Kid and Jim Hatfield are much more intelligent than any marshal or sheriff who ever chased

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Morgan, and being much smarter they would pretty quickly catch on to the fact that Morgan wasn't a real outlaw at all, but was doing a heap of good in his own way. So I bet you there would be a very quiet little agreement some dark night and the manhunters would suddenly become very nearsighted after that whenever Morgan was around!

I just finished the June, 1947, issue, and of course found SILVER OF SATAN very enjoyable. But I think the Broken Bow stories by L. Ernenwein are stealing the show. There's a man who can write westerns so that you hear, see, smell and taste them! Let's have more of Ernenwein!—*Jimmy Conklin, Louisville, Kentucky.*

Which is to say, James, that you love not the Rio Kid less, but Broken Bow more. Thanks for your opinion.

Let's hear from all you, *amigos.* Send your bouquets and brickbats to The Editor, RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Whether or not we print an excerpt from your letter, you may be sure we'll appreciate hearing from you and take your comments into consideration in planning future issues. So long, and thanks, everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

A MANSION FOR MAYBELLE

(Concluded from page 91)

bloom loveliness. Just like the time he'd first seen her, six years ago.

"Maybelle!" Slicky blurted, and watched her run toward him.

"I—I came to—kiss you good-by," she reported blushingly.

Slicky pointed to the sacks of gold. "I'm going to stay and build another dam," he said happily. "A bigger, better dam for my friends in Dragoon Basin."

"Then I won't have to kiss you good-by!" Maybelle exclaimed.

Slicky shook his head. "But you can kiss me for something else," he suggested.

"What?" Maybelle asked smilingly.

"For that mansion I promised you on Residential Avenue," Slicky said, and took her in his arms.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

GOLDEN EMPIRE

By DEAN OWEN

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AW, COME ON LET'S SEE THE REST OF THE "FAIR"!
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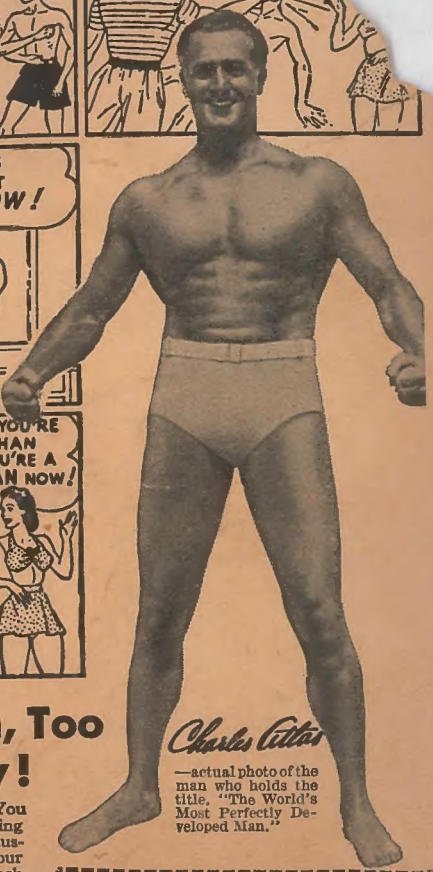
ONE HAND IS AS GOOD AS TWO WHEN YOU'RE AN ATLAS CHAMP
THERE GOES THE BELL—JOE, YOU'RE WONDERFUL
OUT OF THE WAY SMALL-FRY, MAKE WAY FOR A MAN!
O-OH, JOE, YOU'RE MORE THAN THAT—YOU'RE A HE-MAN NOW!



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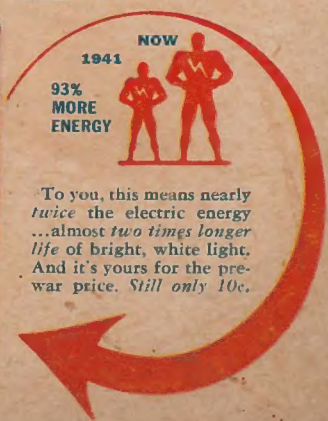

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